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March 14, 1882.

Vol. X.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

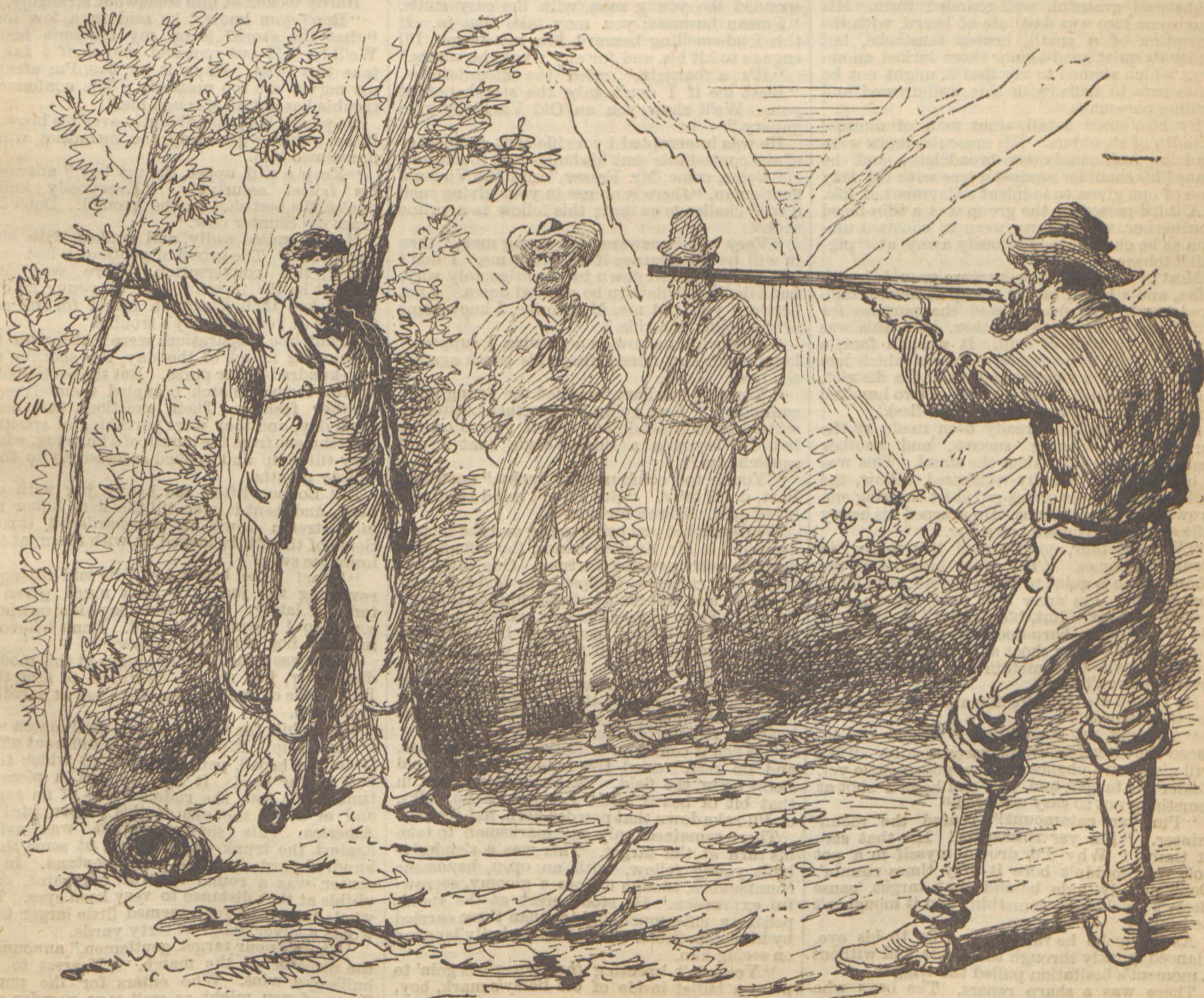
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No. 242.

THE TWO 'BLOODS'; or, SHENANDOAH BILL AND HIS GANG. A MOUNTAIN ROMANCE.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "BOB ROCKETT, THE BANK RUNNER," "BOB ROCKETT, THE BOY DODGER," "WILL WILDFIRE," "DARK PAUL," ETC., ETC.



FRANK STOOD WITH UNFLINCHING FACE AS THE RIFLE SLOWLY CAME UP TO THE MARKSMAN'S SHOULDER.

The Two 'Bloods';

OR,
Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.

A MOUNTAIN ROMANCE.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "SAM CHARCOAL," "TOM TANNER," "DASHING DAVE," "DARK PAUL," "SHADOW SAM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A VIRGINIA RIFLE MATCH.

OUR story opens in a wild region of West Virginia. Rugged mountains were visible to right and left; here, near at hand, the long-reaching Shenandoah range; yonder, in the far distance, the blue summits of the lofty Alleghenies. It was far more of a hunting than of an agricultural district. The towns were few and far between, the farms narrow and poorly tilled, while the wild woodland of the mountain slopes invaded the valley in green outreaching promontories.

In a clearing of this region, just outside the small village of Sumter, on a fresh October morning, was gathered a group of men, who had come together rather for sport than for business.

They were mostly stalwart, hardy, weather-beaten fellows, dressed in rough but strong attire, and far better suited for the perils of mountain and forest than for the civilities of city life.

But on the edge of this group of mountaineers stood a small party of men very different from them in dress and appearance. The most noticeable of these was a young man of middle height and graceful, well-rounded form. His handsome face was destitute of beard, with the exception of a small, brown mustache, but under its quiet good-humor there lurked an energy which seemed to say that it might not be quite safe to trifle with this well-dressed and smiling personage.

By him stood a tall, stout man of unusual breadth of shoulders. His muscular limbs were clad in fashionably-cut broadcloth, and he leaned his shoulder against a tree with the lazy ease of one given to indolent enjoyment of life.

A third person in the group was a thin-faced Southerner, whose jaws were in constant motion as he chewed industriously away at "pig-tail" tobacco.

Most of the mountaineers were provided with rifles, and a broad target set up at several hundred yards' distance showed the purpose for which they had come together. But this was no ordinary trial of skill. It was, in fact, a special match for a series of prizes which had been set up by a rich inhabitant of the district, and which varied from a purse of two hundred dollars to a silver-mounted powder-flask.

Several shots had already been made at the target, with varying success, and another marksman had just taken the stand. This was a brown-faced, heavily-whiskered fellow, the rolled-back sleeves of his red shirt showing embrowned muscular arms. He grasped his heavy rifle as though it were but a toy.

"Vamose thar, now!" cried this fellow, in stentorian tones. "The black buzzard of the Shenandoah is goin' to make Rome howl 'bout that target! I'm arter that powder-horn, flat-footed, you bet! But, blow me if I like to level old Betsy at a barn-door, like that bit of timber! I'd sooner shoot at a peeled stick or a swaller's eye, or somethin' as every blasted greenhorn can't hit."

He patted his rifle affectionately as he roared out these words.

"All right, my good fellow," replied the tobacco-chewing gentleman, sarcastically. "We will give you a chance to show your mettle yet. Center the target, and you can have a shot at something not so easy centered."

"I'm yer catamount!" roared the mountaineer. "I'm yer rhinoceros! Hit that slab of timber? Why I'd drown myself in a pot hole if I couldn't bore it fifty times rannin'. Don't nobody hide behind that target, 'cause Betsy's goin' to say somethin', and it moughtn't be healthy."

As he spoke he raised the rifle to his eye, glanced quickly through the sights, and without a moment's hesitation pulled the trigger.

There was a sharp report. The boys who were attending on the target rushed forward, and examined the painted rings on the broad board. One of them waved a handkerchief,

while he placed his finger on a spot just inside the central ring.

"Hoopee!" roared the marksman, jumping up and cracking his heels. "An inch to the left, and it'd been a dead bull's-eye! Didn't want to spile that purty bit of blue paint or I'd made a plum center. There ain't no use buzzin', but that thar rifle is goin' to wipe out the hull caboose to-day; now you hear me!"

"Hear you? Why you don't imagine that we are all stone deaf?" asked the young gentleman whom we have described. "It isn't any hard matter to hear the roaring of a buffalo bull. Brag's a good dog, my friend, but he isn't the best."

"Who the blazes is you that's a-pitchin' in here?" roared the mountaineer savagely. "I'll swipe that purty face if you say brag to me again. You derved city snipe, mebber you've a notion you kin discount Betsy!"

"I am not here to shoot to-day," was the quiet reply.

"I thought you weren't," growled the other. "Comin' here meddlin' with riflemen and don't know the trigger from the sight-piece, blast yer imperdence!"

"Hold your horses, crony," answered the young man with a meaning smile. "Don't crow too loud before you find what fence you are on. If you want a friendly shot after the match is over, I'm your man."

"You!" and the fellow broke into a horse-laugh. "Blame my eyes if the banty ain't a-goin' to crow! Say, lads, this drygoods pattern is a-goin' to shoot ag'in' the Shanandoah buzzard, sure pop! Can't some of you go borrrer Jake Blunt's big barn? We'll want a hefty target."

A loud laugh broke from the crowd. Evidently they thought the challenge a very amusing and a very absurd one.

"Go on with your match, gentlemen," responded the young man, with his easy smile. "I mean business; you may take that in. If this loud-smelling buzzard hits my target, I'll engage to hit his, and for any wager he wants."

"It's a bargain," cried the mountaineer. "Blast me if I don't take the starch out of you. We'll show you an Old Varginny rifle gallery."

He was interrupted by a rifle-shot, as another of the contestants sent his bullet into the target.

"Come, come, Mr. Frazer," said the Virginia gentleman, "there is no use in your giving such a wild challenge as that; this fellow is a prime shot."

"Very well," answered the young man, "then it will be no disgrace if he beats me. I don't mind being talked down in a gentlemanly way, but I don't calculate to be crowed down. And, between you and me, Mr. Smike, I know some of the points of a rifle."

"You can hit a cow in a pasture, I suppose," laughed his lazy friend from his perch against the tree.

"You dry up, Bart," replied the young man, smilingly. "I am going to give that blustering whickerando a set-down, and if you're on the bet, I'll lay you a double-eagle that I will squelch him."

"You're too confoundedly lucky," answered Bart, doubtfully. "But I don't mind risking a bit of gold. Here's for you."

While this bet was being made, and the money deposited in Mr. Smike's hands, the rifle-match went on with varying fortune. One after another the riflemen stepped up, leveled their weapons, and sent their bullets whizzing through the air. They were, as a rule, excellent shots, many of them having spent their lives in forest and mountain, and been familiar with the rifle from boyhood.

The target was perforated with a score of bullet-holes, many of them within the inner ring, though none had yet beaten the shot of the boasting red-shirted mountaineer.

"When it comes to a three-hundred yarder, and no rest," cried this fellow, "I'll set old Betsy ag'in' the field. Thar's my signateer, in that bit of board. Jist you spruce up, folks, or I'll rake down that powder-horn, flat-footed."

There remained only one marksman to take his turn at the target. This was a slenderly-built young fellow, with an open, handsome countenance, though it bore a gloomy, sorrowful expression. He stood erect at the stand, poising a rifle much lighter than those carried by his competitors. The boasting bully laughed on seeing him.

"You ain't 'speeting that pop-gun's goin' to plant a bullet inside of old Betsy's mark, hey, little one?"

"It is going to try," answered the young man, quietly.

"Oh! you get home to yer mammy! Don't be pokin' yer boy's face here 'mong men. Folks say as yer likely to be wanted to home."

The youth turned quickly with pale face and compressed lips. There was a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

But another of the party took up the quarrel. This was a big-fisted, broad-shouldered, oldish man, who pushed rudely between the antagonists, and shoved the bully back with little reverence.

"See yere, Bill Bounce," cried the peace-maker. "Ye've got blow enough to take the leaves off 'n oak tree. I s'pose you think you own all creation and a slice of the United States to boot; but blast my eyebrows if I don't curry ye down myself, if ye keep puffin' yer sealin'-wax round yere. Jist put that in yer pipe and smoke it."

The bully retreated before this resolute tone. There was a dignity in the bearing of the old man, and the look of one accustomed to control his rough associates, while his stout frame showed that he could hold his own, if his decrees had to be supported with brute force.

The bully retired grumbling, and without venturing a reply.

Meanwhile the young man had taken a quick but careful aim, and pulled the trigger. He rested the butt of his rifle on the ground, and leaned upon its smoking muzzle, while he awaited the report of the target attendants. There was a strange gloom upon his face, as of with some secret source of trouble.

"Half an inch too far to the left," exclaimed one of the spectators. "You're out in the cold, Hardy. Bill Bounce has won the horn. You didn't make the right allowance for the wind."

"He's welcome to the prize," returned Hardy, walking away.

"Are you in for the next match? The two hundred-dollar prize?"

Hardy looked at him somewhat strangely.

"Don't you know," he said in a low tone, "that the sheriff is on my mother's house? We'll be sold out root and branch if I fail to take this prize. Hang it all, Joe, I'm afeared my nerves are too unsteady. The confounded trouble has got all through me."

He passed his hand absently over his brow, as if he would wipe away the memories which unmanned him.

"Keep a stiff upper lip, my boy," answered his friend assuringly. "Everybody knows you're the best shot on the ground. Don't disgrace old Sumter now."

Hardy smiled sadly, and walked with slow steps away. The group of gentlemen had overheard this conversation. There was deep interest in the faces of the two young men as they asked their Virginian friend for the particulars of young Hardy's trouble.

Meanwhile preparations were making for the concluding match of the day, the shot for the two-hundred-dollar purse. But the participants in the former match occupied themselves in another fashion. Their exertions had made them dry, and they were partaking of spiritual refreshment from the mouth of a huge jug, which they tilted up and applied successively to their thirsty mouths.

Bill Bounce lifted the heavy jug with one hand, and bent it over till the fiery liquor ran in a stream down his case-hardened throat. Some of the others looked on with alarm at this immense swig.

"Thar! I feel better now," he said at length, reversing the jug. "I ain't much given to imbibin' lately. The doctor says it's onwhole-some; so I allers tap it mild. Don't b'lieve in makin' a hog of myself, nobow."

There was some dubious laughs at this modest disclaimer, but no one ventured to hint that Bill's ideas of moderation were set at a rather high level.

Meanwhile the target for the final match was being set up. It proved a very different affair from the broad, painted board at which they had so far fired. It was, in fact, a piece of timber cut into the rude outline of an eagle, and of about the size of this patron bird of America. This slender target was nailed against the trunk of a sapling, at some three hundred yards from the shooting-stand. In its center was a round spot of red paint, only visible at that distance to very keen eyes. The whole target, in fact, seemed little larger than would a silver dollar at forty yards.

"There's your target, gentlemen," announced the director of the match. "Nearest to the bull's-eye wins. Who enters for the purse? Some of you might as well save powder and ball, but if you want to come in there's no limit. Step right up to the captain's office and

register. Come ahead, my jolly riflemen, and draw for places!"

In response to this the marksmen crowded around the speaker, who had improvised a table out of his hat, and was busily engaged taking down their names.

"How, now, my boy?" asked the lazy gentleman of his friend, "are you going to take part?"

"Not much. But I back down before no bragging bully. I'll challenge the fellow to a private match after this is over."

CHAPTER II.

THE SHOT FOR THE MAIN PRIZE.

It was with no friendly look that Bill Bounce regarded the city-bred youth, who had been bold enough to challenge him to a trial of skill with rifles. He had no thought of being beaten, yet there was an ease and self-possession about the young fellow which he did not relish, and he hated him on principle, as he hated all who opposed him.

Who were these chaps, and what had brought them to this out-of-the-way corner of Virginia? he asked himself. The mountaineers usually had this region to themselves. They were little troubled by strangers, and particularly by such fancily-dressed individuals as these. Were they only summer birds of fashion, or had they other business in this rural region?

The bully looked at them with a surly aspect. One who knew him well might have judged that he was not quite at ease. He had reasons of his own to distrust strangers. His life record was not a very clean one.

"Dunno what brings them city dandies out yere," he growled to a companion. "And then, jist to think of the impudence of the half-weaned baby, to come sproutin' 'round Bill Bounce! Wonder if he thinks I'm fed on skim-milk?"

"Are you goin' to shoot with him, Bill?"

Bill laughed grimly, as he gazed at the youth.

"Why you don't s'pose he'll stick, does you?" "Looks as if he might."

"An' do you calk'late the Alleghany war-hoss is goin' to back down afore a counter-jumper like that? Ef he was goin' ter shoot with yard-sticks 'stead of rifles, then you mought talk. Like to ring him in on a big bet, and then salt him, that's all."

"Take care, Bill! Some of these city chaps are good shots."

"Yes, with pop-guns," laughed Bill, derisively. "They kin hit a barn door, at twenty paces. But let one of them try fur an owl's eye, on a swingin' limb, a good hundred yards away, or summat of that sort. It's the doggone impudence of the fool as gits me. But, let him howl on. We'll see if he don't git the starch took outter him."

"They must be some of Mr. Smike's city friends," suggested the other.

"Who keers! I don't like old Smike fur nothin'. If he comes pokin' his nose round my way I'll bust it, sure. And I don't like none of his puppies no more nor I do him."

While this conversation was going on the two city gentlemen, in another part of the field, were conversing with young Hardy.

There was a look of settled gloom on the face of the youth, and he seemed inclined to shrink from the strangers, as if he was in no mood for talking.

"How came you to let that bully beat you?" asked the younger of the two citizens. "Mr. Smike says you are the best shot on the ground."

"I ain't quite in trim to-day," was the brief answer.

"Are you in for the big prize?"

"I've got to win it, or—"

He turned away without completing his sentence.

"Or what?"

"No matter," a little angrily. "I don't see that you gentlemen have any business to mix into our mountain troubles."

"We don't mean to offend you," answered Bart. "My friend here, Mr. Frank Frazer, is the last person to hurt the feelings of any man. You are too sensitive, my lad."

"I can't help it," replied the youth, rubbing away the tears that involuntarily sprang to his eyes. "My father—my dear father—has just died! My mother and my little sisters—oh, sirs, they are in such trouble! And only a boy like me to look after them!"

"You need the prize they are going to shoot for now?"

"If I don't win it we will be sold out of house and home."

Young Hardy leaned upon his rifle, with his eyes fixed upon the ground. He could say no more.

"It is a bad business, my dear fellow," said Mr. Frazer, feelingly. "But you won't win it; so don't build on that."

"How the deuce do you know he won't, Frank?" cried Bart, while an angry flash came from Hardy's eyes.

"Because he has lost his nerve. Get angry, my boy. Desperate. Anything but down-hearted. No man who is in the blues can make a true shot."

"I can try, anyhow," answered Hardy, quietly but resolutely, as he walked away.

"What the blazes ails you, Frank?" Bart angrily exclaimed. "Do you want to take all the spirit out of the lad?"

"I want to put some in him," answered Frank. "If I could make him a little spiteful it might bring out what pith there is in him. No man without a strong nerve can hit that center." He pointed to the red spot in the center of the target.

"You brag on your shooting. Why don't you put in for it yourself, and give it to the poor devil if you win?"

"Come, Bart, no chaff. You think I have no chance?"

"About as much as a cat has of crawling through a knot-hole."

"Don't take too much stock on that margin," was Frank's quiet answer. "Anyhow, this is the mountain men's match. I won't meddle. But I will shoot with that big bully, no matter what comes of it."

"You will be laughed at for your pains."

"Did you ever see me pull trigger, Bart?"

"No. Can't say as I did."

"Then don't crow too loud, that's all. That fellow may win my cap, but he won't take its feather. If I had my own piece here I would engage to beat him. I will try him, anyhow, with Hardy's rifle. I rather like the look of it."

Bart laughed incredulously as they walked toward the shooting stand.

The crack of rifles had already commenced. Fully fifty riflemen had entered for the match. The most of them, it is true, had no expectation of winning. But they had all done good work in the mountain forests, and each was willing to put up his stake for a chance shot.

A wind had risen since the previous match, and blew transversely to the line of shot. It was rather irregular, and it was not easy to tell just how much allowance to make for it. But to men used to taking snap shots in all sorts of weather this did not matter much. Each hoped that the wind might favor him.

A three hundred yards shot, without rest, with a cross wind, and a small target, is a severe test to ordinary riflemen. It is not to be wondered that many shots missed the target altogether, and were buried in the tree, while other's struck the outer edges of the narrow board.

But two or three nearer shots were made, the nearest being about two inches from the center. The lucky owner of this shot eyed it with great complacency.

"It's not so bad," he averred. "I won't sell my share in the pool for less than a cool hundred."

"You'd best take twenty, if any fellow is green enough to offer. For I'm goin' to plant a bullet inside yours."

The speaker was the stalwart, oldish man, who had so quickly settled Bill Bounce a short time before. He was an old mountaineer, and had been noted as a prime shot. But he had lost some of his youthful nerve.

The rifle was brought to his eye and aimed with great care.

"Old Tom isn't the man he used to be," whispered a bystander. "He used to shoot on sight."

The quick ears of the old man caught this whisper. He turned sharply round and fixed his keen eyes on the speaker.

"So you think Old Tom's lost his nerve, eh?" with a bitter laugh. "I'll wager you a cow I would bring down that bird if it was soaring two hundred yards overhead. Here's a snap for you."

He turned, glanced his eye like lightning along the rifle barrel, and pulled the trigger.

"I'll bet you it's the best shot in the board, afore there's a call," he offered.

But no one was inclined to take the offered bet. They knew what Old Tom Turnstile was equal to when he was riled.

"A scant inch and a half from the center," cried the marker. "And a hard shot to beat."

"That's so; with this wind," said the old

man, calmly. "I'd engage to plug the bull's-eye if it was still weather."

The shooting continued, with varied fortune. Some forty shots had been made before the name of Bill Bounce was called. He responded with a wild whoop as he sprung forward.

"Yere's yer rhinoceros in an alligator's hide!" he roared. "Yere's the ring-tailed turkey-buzzard that's a-goin' to rake down that stake! Make tracks, folks, and let roarin' Bill Bounce up to the winnin'-post."

"Dry up!" cried Old Tom, in disgust. "Less gas and more powder would go down better with us boys."

"Ye s'pose I'm braggin," answered Bill, somewhat quieted by this reproof. "We'll see, old hoss. Bill Bounce ain't that sort."

That he was a first-class shot they all knew, and those whose names were yet to be called waited with some anxiety for his effort.

The loud-mouthed marksman wasted little time in preparation. The rifle came quickly to his eye, and its sharp report came almost as quickly. The wind had lulled at the moment, which gave him a special advantage.

"There's yer bull's-eye," he cried. "Old Betsy never wastes no bullets."

It proved to be so. The bullet had pierced the edge of the red circle, at less than an inch from the dead-center of the target.

"It'll take a hundred and ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents to buy that shot," he boastfully exclaimed, as he left the stand. "There's a chance for anybody as wants to make a cent."

These odds were rather too great for any one to care to take up, and the shooting proceeded, Bill Bounce looking on with a stare of insolent triumph.

Young Hardy was one of the last of the marksmen. His face was full of a gloomy determination as he walked up to the shooting stand.

"Ther' ain't no use, Hardy," cried the insolent bully. "Ye know the bit of free-gratis advice I guv ye a while ago."

The youth's lip curled as he gazed sternly at the speaker. He seemed on the point of answering, but checked himself, and gave his attention to the target.

His young face looked haggard and careworn, but his eye was steady and his frame firm as he faced the small, distant object.

Mr. Smike and his two city friends pressed close up. They were greatly interested in the fortune of the present marksman.

Hardy took a long and steady aim, his eye keenly ranging the sights. At length his finger pressed the trigger. A sharp report came from his short-barreled rifle.

There had been a lull in the wind at the moment of his taking aim. But the next instant a gust of wind swept by. The boy flung the breech of his rifle spitefully to the ground. He turned away with a sullen countenance.

"It's all up," he said, to Mr. Smike. "If I'd only shot two seconds sooner! That gust has settled it. Fortune is dead against me."

"A miss," cried the marker. "But it is a good shot. It's on a line with Old Tom's."

"And the fellow as can line Old Tom ain't no slouch," remarked that individual.

"A miss is as good as a mile," Hardy gloomily rejoined. "It's all up," he said to himself. "The house is gone to the dogs, and my mother and the little ones are homeless. It's mighty hard."

There were tears in the youth's eyes as he left the circle, most of whom were in sympathy with him.

A hand tapped him on the shoulder, as he was moving with depressed head, along the path that led to the neighboring village.

The downcast youth turned, with a look of surly anger, but his face brightened on seeing who had touched him. It was the city gentleman, Frank Frazer.

"Come, come, friend Hardy!" cried the latter cheerily. "Keep up your spirits, my good fellow. Trouble can't last forever, and it is best to face it down at once."

"That's not so easy, sir."

"Try, and you'll find it is not so hard. I want to borrow your rifle, Hardy. I have a match with that roaring ruffler, Bill Bounce."

"You?" in great surprise.

"Yes."

"But you will have no chance with him."

"Don't be so sure of that. Can I have the rifle?"

"Of course you can; and my good wishes with it."

At this moment the last rifle cracked. The match was ended.

There came a roar of exultation from the winning bully. He sprang up and cracked his heels together.

"By the r'arin' ripstaver, didn't I tell you?" he shouted. "The idear of you boys shootin' ag'in' me! Jist slide out till I rake down that cool two hundred."

"Hold up, my friend. You've got a match with me yet."

It was the voice of the city gentleman, Frank Frazer.

"You!" roared the bully. "You ain't confounded jackass enough to shoot ag'in' Bill Bounce?"

"I'll lay two hundred against your prize, and shoot you a match for the pool or nothing."

"Done!" cried the exultant mountaineer. "It's a square bet. And we chaps don't allow no back-down."

"All right. Don't you try it on then," was the cool reply.

CHAPTER III.

A LUCKY RIFLE.

FIFTEEN minutes have passed since the moment of the close of our last chapter. This interval has been enough to produce considerable excitement in the throng of sportsmen. The match between Bill Bounce and the city gentleman seems to them utterly ridiculous. It cannot be possible that the stranger will have any chance against their crack marksman. Yet the bet is a big one, and the man does not look like a braggart. No one can tell what may turn up. They cannot help taking a deep interest in the match.

"What's to be the target?" cried the mountaineer. "I can't waste my vallyble time yere. Ther's duck in the mountings, and old Betsy's hankerin' arter them. Jist stir up, so's I kin rake down that there stake, and git."

His opponent smiled, as he continued to slice the bark from a slender willow wand, which he had just cut. It was about six feet long, and he was barking it for about a foot from one end.

"Here's your target," he said, holding up the slender stick. "The man that can cut this between bark and wood at a hundred paces, takes the pool. That's the bull's-eye, and the nearest wins."

He pointed to the spot, where the barked met the unbarked portion of the stick.

Bill Bounce whistled, and then broke into a hearty laugh. The affair seemed to strike him comically.

"All squar', my honey," he ejaculated. "I'll shoot at a streak o' lightnin', or a midge's eye. Yer can't play no dodges on Alleghany Bill, nary time. But ye're not 'spectin' to hit that thar toothpick?"

"I'll try to slice a little more bark from it," replied Frank, as he closed his knife, and returned it to his pocket. "Just stick this bit of timber in the ground, at a hundred paces." He handed it to one of the managers of the match.

"Yer don't mean to say as yer in earnest?" asked Bill, in astonishment.

"You bet I am!"

"Shoot me fur a punkin-eater if I thought ye war sich a fool! Wake up thar, hosses! The Shanandoah rhinoceros is in a hurry to rake down that cash. Put up stakes, incontinenter."

"My money is up, against your prize," answered Frank, as he tried the hammer of his weapon.

"Load it for me, Hardy," he said, to the young man. "You know its paces better than I do."

Hardy took the weapon, with a very doubtful expression. He stepped up close to the young man, who was resting easily against a tree.

"You are barrowing away your money, sir," he protested. "You have no chance against that man. You had best lose the forfeit and draw stakes."

"That's what I think," remarked Mr. Smike, the Virginian. "You saw in the last match how the man could shoot."

"Let him go on," cried Bart, satirically. "Money is no object with us city bucks. He has got to earn his education."

Frank smiled quietly as these remarks were made. He would have returned some answer, but just then one of the judges tossed up a silver dollar for choice of shots.

"Heads or tails?" he demanded.

"Heads," cried out Frank.

"And heads it is. You have first choice."

"Very well; then our Shenandoah alligator can have first shot; and some of you tell him

quietly to do his best. He may find he has no slouch to deal with."

"I'd jist like to shoot you with blunderbusses ag'in' a brick house," retorted the mountaineer, "it's a dead shame to waste the fine p'int of a rifle on a counter-jumper as don't know a sight from a pig's eye."

"All clever," smiled Frank. "There's your target, let's see what's in you."

The slender, greenish rod was scarcely visible against the grassy background. Only its whitish upper portion was distinctly visible, and at the distance it looked like a mere line.

Old Tom shook his head doubtfully.

"The grass blinds it," he said. "You might as well try to bark a swallow's tail with a flying bullet."

"Yer eyes ain't as sharp as they used to were, old fellow," returned Bill Bounce, as he stepped up to the shooting station. "Why, old hoss, I've shot the point off a 'skeeter's sting afore now. Ye don't s'pose I'll back down from that thar toothpick? Not much, I reckon."

All was silent as the renowned marksman brought the rifle to his eye. There was no brag about Bill now, the prize was too valuable to take any chances on. The wind had luckily fallen, and his keen eye ranged the sights with all his old skill. The spectators anxiously awaited the result.

A light pressure of the finger, a flash of light, a keen report, and the bullet sped on its path.

There was a rush toward the target. Bill rested on his smoking rifle, with some anxiety on his rough face.

"A prime shot," came the announcement, "the bullet chipped the wood not an inch above the bark."

"Whoopee!" screamed Bill, as he sprang from the ground and clacked his heels. "Didn't I sw'ar as old Betsy'd do it? When the Shanandoah buzzard talks ther's fun in the wind. Stir up to ther captin's office, hoss-flies, and imbibe! It's my treat, and the feller as don't h'ist p'izen is goin' to git his b'iler bu'st, you bet!"

"Wait till you are out of the woods, my rooster, before you crow too loud," suggested Frank Frazer, satirically, as he walked forward, bearing the rifle on his shoulder. "You can spend as much of your own cash as you want, but I've got some say in that stake."

"Why yer ain't infernal jackass to think as you kin te'ch that thar sapling?"

"I can try," answered Frank quietly.

He raised the rifle to his eye, and glanced along its sights.

"How does it shoot, Hardy?" he asked. "Is there any adjustment to make?"

"Not at that distance. Aim dead center. And I hope the confounded wind won't serve you the trick it did me."

"Jist wait, lads," winked Bill, "till our city bucks larns which end of the rifle the powder goes in."

"I can show you which end the bullet comes out," retorted Frank.

As he spoke the rifle was raised in the line of the wand. Then for a single instant it rested, the young man standing in a graceful attitude, while not a muscle moved. Then fire flashed from the muzzle of the weapon.

He had shot so quickly, and with so little show of aim, that the most of the spectators supposed the rifle had gone off accidentally. All eyes glanced at the target, but it was no longer visible. It had mysteriously disappeared.

"Shoot me for a donkey ef the boy ain't rooted the stick clean out of the ground," laughed his opponent.

"I've a notion not," replied Frank. "I thought you bragged on your eyesight."

"It is the grass that's hiding the stick!" cried Hardy. "The white part is gone, and the grass hides the green."

"By the saints, it can't be!" exclaimed Old Tom, as he ran briskly forward.

"It's an infernal lie!" roared Bill.

"Is it, my cove? We shall see." Frank rested his chin on his smoking rifle.

A loud cry came from the men about the target.

"A dead center! A dead center! And the stick cut as clean as a whistle!"

One of the men ran forward with the two pieces of the target in his hand. The barked portion of the stick was cut from the remainder as cleanly as if done with a knife. Frank's friends crowded around him with congratulations. Bill stood aside, with a look of surly fury on his face.

"Ther's some hanged trick!" he yelled. "It's not in the chap to do it. It's a put-up job to cheat me out of the pool. Shoot me fur a screech-owl if I stand it!"

"I think you will," retorted the resolute judge of the match. "Maybe it's a chance shot, but Mr. Frazer has fairly won. The stakes are his."

"Blast me if they is, then! I ain't goin' to be wolfed out my rights. If he wants that cash he's got to fight a mounting rhinoceros fur it."

Bill flung his coat to the ground, and advanced in a hostile attitude.

"You want to fight, do you?" returned Frank. "Come on, then, if *that's* your game."

He handed the rifle to Mr. Smike, and placed himself in a posture of defense. His somewhat slender frame looked like a mere twig beside that of the burly ruffian. Yet his eyes were fixed on Bill with a look that meant mischief.

"I'll take passage in that boat, if there's no objection," cried Bart, as he strode up, with his burly form and broad shoulders.

"Leave him to me," exclaimed Frank angrily. "I've carried bigger mules than this one, before now."

But the threatened fight was not to take place. A rush of the mountaineers parted the combatants.

"The boy has won fair, and the stake is his," cried one of these. "You subside, Bill, or we'll settle your hash."

The furious ruffian glared at the determined faces surrounding him. Then, with a curse, and a muttered threat of revenge, he flung his weapon across his shoulder, and strode moodily into the woods.

"You must look out for him," warned Old Tom. "He is dangerous when he is crossed. He may do you a harm."

"I don't fear him," answered Frank.

Those present crowded around him with congratulations. There was not a rough mountaineer in the crowd but insisted on shaking hands and drinking with the successful marksman.

"Oh, drop that, lads!" cried Frank modestly. "I guess the shot was half chance. And if I were to drink with all of you I would have to be carried out on a shutter. But mind, it is my treat. Make yourselves at home with the fluid."

They were not slow to obey. Frank quietly received his winnings from the stake-holder, and walked away toward his friends.

"Where is Hardy?" he asked.

"Over yonder, by the big oak. The poor fellow is awfully down."

"Here's your rifle, my lad," remarked Frank to the gloomy youth. "I am sorry that it was my hands and not yours that it won the prize."

"It's all right," replied Hardy, quietly receiving it. "Fortune is dead against me. It can't be helped."

He threw the weapon over his shoulder, and strode sullenly away.

"Be sure and clean your rifle after you get home," Frank called after him. "I am afraid the barrel is a little foul."

"Ay, ay," answered the youth, without turning his head.

Ten minutes' walk through the woods and the adjoining clearing, brought him to a pretty cottage, which stood somewhat outside the village. Behind it was a garden, and at a distance a small, but well-tilled farm.

A handsome middle-aged lady met him at the door. She was very plainly dressed, and the look of hope upon her face changed to gloom when she caught sight of her son's shadowed face.

"Don't worry, mother," he remarked. "It is all for the best. I did not win the prize, it is true. But Providence will not desert us."

"Oh! my poor boy!" cried the widow. "And you went out with such hopes."

"The wind was against me," he rejoined.

He seated himself languidly on a stool in the porch. Two little girls came from the house, and looked with silent sympathy into his face.

"Let me have your gun," asked the eldest. "I will take it in."

He was roused by this remark.

"Mr. Frazer told me to be sure and clean it," he said. "I don't know why. Nothing ails it."

"There's something in it, anyway," remarked the younger child, who had drawn the ramrod and inserted it into the barrel.

"Something in it!" he exclaimed, in a tone of surprise. "How can there be?"

He struck the muzzle two or three times smartly on the floor.

"There is nothing comes," he said.

"Yes. Here it is," cried little Lucy, inserting her slender fingers, and drawing out what seemed a thick wad of paper.

"Mercy on us! what is that?" cried the mother. "It looks like bank notes."

The boy dropped the rifle, and with trembling fingers seized the greenish mass. He hastily opened it out. The mother was right; it was a roll of bank notes.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "Where could they ever have come from?"

Her son had hastily counted them. There were two hundred dollars!

"It is Mr. Frazer's money," he cried. "I have no right with it. I must take it back to him."

"There is a note in the package," called out the mother. "Read it."

The young man hastily opened and read the penciled note:

"It was not me, it was your good rifle that won this prize. I place it where it belongs. Take it for your mother and sisters' sake. F. F."

"He gives it to us!" cried the son, with clasped hands.

"Heaven bless him, whoever he is!" rejoined the grateful mother. "His generous heart has saved us from ruin!"

CHAPTER IV.

A VIRGINIA DINNER-PARTY.

DOWN in the heart of the valley, about ten miles from the town of Sumter, and close beside the current of the Shenandoah river, stood a stone house of considerable pretensions, and as solidly built as if intended for a fortress. The grounds around it were neatly laid out, while the green fields and ripening harvests of a considerable plantation stretched far and wide around it.

This place was known to the people in the vicinity as Gordon Hall. It was the residence of an old Virginian family, though now occupied by Mr. Smike as agent for the present owner, who had been several years absent in Europe.

Smike was a good fellow in his way. He worked the plantation of his employer honestly and skillfully, and asked for only enough tobacco to keep his lantern jaws in motion, and a set of "niggers" who were worth their weight in salt. This "nigger question" was the one bane of his life.

The two city gentlemen, Frank Frazer and Bart Wilson, were visiting him, and on the day after the shooting-match sat down with him to dinner in the richly-paneled dining-room of Gordon Hall. There were several other guests present, and the dinner-party promised to be a lively one.

"Try a cut of this venison, Mr. Frazer," demanded Mr. Smike. "You'll find it prime, I promise you. It was cut from a ten-tined buck that was shot on our own mountains yesterday. There's no better deer-meat between the two seas."

"A very tender slice then," replied Frank. "I have not much appetite left."

"You needn't trouble yourself to be tender with me," cried Bart. "Cut deep and wide. I have a hearty appetite for venison."

"That's clever. It's a noble roast, and I want you to do justice to it."

"I like your Shenandoah small game better," rejoined Frank, as he carved away at the breast-bone of a chicken.

"Every man to his taste. That's my motto," returned Smike. "Hope you are all enjoying yourselves, gentlemen. What'll you have, Johnson? Pass up your plate for venison."

"I did not think that Mr. Frazer was a patron of small game, by the way he brought down some of our large game yesterday," remarked Mr. Miller, a red-faced farmer. "We folks round here don't look on bragging Bill Bounce as small game."

"I do, then," said Frank. "He is very small game."

"None of that, Frank," cried Bart. "He is a deuced good shot, and you know it. By what thundering chance you managed to hit that peeled stick I can't see. Some good angel backed you, for I'll be shot if it was in you."

"All sheer luck," returned Frank, coolly, as he sliced his venison.

"That cock won't fight," answered Mr. Johnson, with a doubting shake of the head. "Luck be fiddled! I saw the shot. There was no luck about it. Hang me if I ever saw a rifle handled so neatly."

"Come, Bart, it's your turn now," laughed Frank. "I hope you will settle it between you whether I am born to good luck, or am a dead shot. Meanwhile I'll sample Mr. Smike's venison. It is prime, and no mistake."

"Didn't I tell you so?" cried Smike, delightedly. "If you like, lads, I'll give you a chance

at venison on the hoof. Our dogs can stir up a deer or two in the mountains here to the left. That's the best way to try if our friend Frazer knows the merits of a rifle."

"I'm agreeable," answered Frank. "But it is a different thing to shoot at a dead target and at a deer on the jump. I'm afraid I will waste ten bullets for every deer I bark."

"Ten!" roared Bart. "None of your bragging, boy. If I can scorch a deer's tail out of ten bushels of bullets I'll count myself a prime shot. Why don't you own up the corn at once. It was a chance bullet that hit that willow. If you fire at another target I wouldn't stand within ten feet of it for a thousand pounds."

"If you shoot at one I will engage to stand behind it for ten cents," retorted Frank.

"I suppose so. It would be the safest place you could find. But stop your bragging. You can't shoot, and that's an end of it."

A burst of laughter followed Bart's humorous persistence.

"All right, my lad," replied Frank, slapping him jovially on the shoulder. "That point's settled, anyhow. Now take my advice and turn to your dinner, or we'll make a famine while you are indulging in eloquence."

"Deuced good advice," muttered Bart, as he looked over the table.

He fell to with an energy that promised to make up for lost time. It was a bountifully spread table, with an abundance of substantial viands, and all the delicacies which that secluded district offered. But Bart's big frame was significant of a hearty appetite, and he quickly showed his intention to make a solid meal.

Meanwhile the conversation went on around the table, in a lively fashion.

"I'm blamed sorry young Hardy didn't carry off that prize," remarked Mr. Johnson. "The poor devil needed it much more than the chap that won it. And if he's in trim he's the best shot in our county. I'll stick to that."

"I don't fancy the winner got much good of it," replied Mr. Miller, with a significant glance at Frank.

The latter continued to quietly devote himself to his dinner, without a hint as to his final disposal of the prize.

"Somehow I don't like to see the Hardy family set adrift," said Mr. Johnson, musingly. "They are well behaved, honest people. Old Tim Hardy was a man to my liking, if he was a fool with his cash. I wouldn't stop at putting up a stake to stave off this trouble from them, if anybody will join."

Two or three others at once agreed to aid in this charitable project.

"I'm one in that line," cried Bart, laying down his knife and fork. "And I'll venture to engage for Frank Frazer."

"Slow and easy, my friend," warned Frank. "That gentleman is here to speak for himself. I never put my money in a hole till I see what's at the bottom of it. I got some idea from Hardy yesterday about his trouble; but I'd like to hear the story straighter."

"It was a bit of foolish speculation, which no farmer has any business to dabble in," replied Mr. Miller. "Old Hardy, after a good deal of hard work, had laid up a few thousands. But he was unlucky enough to have a friend in Baltimore in the brokerage business. The fool put all his money in this man's hands to speculate with. He was going to pile up a big fortune in a week. And he wasn't satisfied with his spare funds, but must lay a mortgage on his little place to raise more. You would have thought he was living in a balloon, by the way his spirits went up. But stocks did not go up so fast."

"I see," said Frank. "The old story. The bottom dropped out of the market."

"It wasn't altogether the broker's fault," continued the narrator. "The money lay in that Baltimore bank, which went up the spout like a whiff of smoke. The one, you know, where the cashier ran away with all the funds."

Frank looked very significantly at Bart, who stopped eating long enough to wink.

"The Trades Union Bank?" asked Frank.

"The same."

"And the broker was Wilbur Branson?"

"Just so. I see you are posted."

"But he went under with the bank. All his funds were in it. He wasn't to blame."

"It was bad for Tim Hardy, anyhow. He went up in a balloon, I say. And he just dropped out of that balloon, and smashed up. A paralytic stroke, the doctor called it. But I say it was a drop from a balloon."

"And what's the trouble now with the Hardys?"

"A foreclosure of the mortgage. It's not a big one, and they only want two hundred dollars to make it up. But they haven't the two hundred."

Frank asked no more questions, but set himself quietly to finish his dinner.

"Come, Frazer," cried Bart. "We are all in for this subscription. How much are you going to put your name down for?"

"Nothing," Frank quietly rejoined. "I am sorry for the poor folks, but I can't begin the business of helping to pull people out of foolish scrapes. We'd be kept busy if we went into that line."

"But it isn't their fault. The old man is dead, don't you hear?"

"All right, Bart. I had no hand in killing him."

This blunt refusal threw a cloud over the festivities of the table. A gloomy silence succeeded, broken only by a few stray words. The guests soon rose and walked carelessly around the room.

"Where did this chap come from, Smike?" asked Mr. Johnson. "Hang me if I thought he was a shirk, after his record yesterday. And he won a two hundred pool."

"He is from Baltimore," answered Smike. "Here on some private business of his own. It's city life; that's what it is. It hardens people."

"Then Lord save me from city life. I despise shirks square through."

"Don't ask me to meet that man again," broke in Mr. Miller. "I don't care to keep up the acquaintance."

Frank and Bart stood at another window, looking out.

"What the deuce ails you, Frank?" growled the latter. "I never knew you to play a mean trick before. And don't you see you've put all these men down on you? Even Smike looks as if his grandfather had just died."

"I thought we'd best nip it in the bud," replied Frank, quietly. "If we begin we'll have to keep all the poor families in the county. You don't look ahead, Bart."

"Hang me if it ain't news come to you," grumbled Bart, as he flung himself angrily away.

A faint smile came upon Frank's face, as he continued to look out of the window.

Five minutes of such quiet conversations, in the corners and windows of the room, did not add to the good opinion of the guests in regard to Frank Frazer. Mr. Johnson looked particularly disgusted.

"Just ask the nigger to get out my horse, Smike," he demanded. "I must be off."

"Won't you stay for the wine?"

"Not to drink with that man."

Poor Smike, with a woe-begone face, moved slowly toward the door.

Ere he could reach it, it opened, with a jerking movement. Young Tim Hardy stood on the threshold, his face deeply flushed, his breath coming quick, as if with exhaustion.

His eyes looked eagerly around the room, taking in the various guests. The next instant he sprang impulsively toward Frank Frazer, who was just turning to see who had entered.

"Oh, sir!" cried the youth, earnestly seizing his hand. "How can I ever thank you? You were too generous. But I cannot take it—I cannot rob you of such a sum."

"I don't know what you mean, Hardy," replied Frank, withdrawing his hand. "You owe me nothing."

The other guests opened their eyes, and looked in astonishment toward the speakers.

"It was you! You know it was!" persisted Hardy, while a look of discomposure passed over Frank's face. "I can't help being grateful! What did I find in my rifle, gentlemen, when I got home, but two hundred dollars in bills? This generous gentleman had stuck his prize into the muzzle of the rifle."

The guests stared at Frank, whose face was still far from expressing satisfaction. Mr. Smike sprang impulsively toward him.

"Why, you infernal humbug!" he ejaculated, as he grasped Frank's hand, and shook it as if he would shake it off. "You mercenary villain! Is that the way you are cheating us?"

"It was your money, Hardy," cried Frank. "Your rifle won it. You would have won it yourself only for a stroke of ill luck. Keep it, and say nothing more about it."

He broke loose from his impulsive friend and sprang out through the open window.

There was a sudden revulsion of feeling among those who remained; they could not think of words suitable to express Frank's generous behavior.

"But what ailed him, anyhow?" cried Mr. Johnson. "Why couldn't he out with it? It's too much like private theatricals. I'll tell you what, Hardy, we were trying to raise a little subscription for you. I'm in for it yet. You'll want more money than this to put you on your feet."

"I won't take it," declared Hardy, resolutely.

"Yes you will. What say, gentlemen? Shall we make it up?"

"Yes," was the unanimous reply.

Five minutes afterward Bart found Frank pacing discontentedly down a garden walk.

"What ails you, old boy?" he cried. "Shoot me if I see any use in putting on airs!"

"I have been a fool, that's all," replied Frank. "I ought to have warned Hardy. I have been putting my foot in it at every step since I came here. It was our game to keep quiet and not be known, yet I let myself be drawn into that confounded rifle-match; then I tried to put these men down on me, so that they would cut me, but here bursts in Hardy and spoils that game. It's all very nice, but I'm afraid our job's checked."

"I don't see how."

"Our man will be put on his guard, that's all; He won't fail to hear that there's a brace of Baltimore sports nosing around. If he gets an eye on us the trap's sprung, for he is sharp enough to know us at sight."

CHAPTER V.

A VIRGINIA BREAKDOWN.

SEVERAL days have passed since the event recorded in our last chapter. It is a pleasant night, not too warm for comfort, and the full moon throws a flood of light over the broad extent of the valley. From a house of some pretensions, a short distance outside the town, comes an unusual glow of lamplight, while the sound of laughing voices speaks of some merry-making within.

Our two friends, Frank Frazer and Bart Wilson are in earnest conversation as they approach this house from the direction of the town.

"I'll give in that I don't know jist what to make of you," declared Bart. "First you go and outshoot the best shot in the valley. Then you ram your innings into the boy's rifle. Then you raise Cain because the lad wants to thank you for it. A high old way you have of keeping shady. And now you're for digging into this hoedown, where you'll be sure to wake up some new snakes."

"Can't help it, Bart," replied Frank, with a sigh. "It's constitutional with me. I can no more help making a fool of myself than a bird can help flying."

"All right," answered Bart, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "I didn't want to tell you you were a jackass. But I've got no objection to your telling yourself."

"It was that bragging bully at the shooting-match that drew me on," continued Frank. "I couldn't stand him. And then I pitied young Hardy, and wanted to win the prize for him. And you were in it too, for you bet me I couldn't win."

"Hang me if I thought you could!" growled Bart. "And how the deuce you did it I can't see now."

"I thought I'd settle the matter by getting everybody down on me," rejoined Frank. "But in bursts Hardy, and spoils it all, and now I suppose I am the most talked of man in the valley."

"I'll swear you are!" ejaculated Bart. "We were going to keep so thundering shady, and to drop down on our man like a sparrow-hawk on a field mouse; but you've dished all that. If he's in these diggings I bet he's heard all about the two Baltimore bloods. And I don't see how you are going to help matters by taking part in this hoedown."

"There's nothing else for it, Bart. We've got to let on that we're only after sport. We've got to sail in now with all the dancing, shooting, and other fun that's afloat. That way we may shut our man's eye up. He will think that we are after smaller fish."

Bart shook his head incredulously.

"He isn't a fool, Frank. Take my word for it, our cake's all dough."

"If I could only get a smell at his hiding-place," answered Frank, dubiously. "But I can't see a shadow. He's as cunning as an old fox."

"They're having fun in that shanty, for sure," cried Bart, as a burst of laughter came to their ears. "Let's dig in and take our share."

It was an exciting scene that met their eyes when they opened the door of the house before

them, and went into the well-lighted room whence came the sounds of merriment.

It was a large apartment, formed of rough hewn boards, with a ceiling of open and well-smoked joists. But this did not trouble the souls of the happy crowd who were dancing upon the springy floor, with a vim that is never seen in a city ball-room.

At one end of the apartment, on a chair that stood on the bottom of an overturned barrel, sat a negro fiddler, his shining black face blazing with enjoyment as he made his old violin fairly talk. He sawed away at the strings as if he was sawing wood on a contract, while now and then a wild howl of excitement came from his lips, as if his enthusiasm was too great to keep in.

The floor was filled with dancers, of all ages and kinds, dressed in what rude country finery they possessed, yet happier than if all the girls were in silks and diamonds, and all the men in broadcloth. For they had come there to have a good time, and they were decidedly having one. All ideas of staid decorum were thrown to the winds. They danced as if hired for day's work, and the way the heels of the lads twinkled in the air, and the light forms of the lasses leaped and bounded like india rubber balls, would have utterly astonished a city dancing master.

"Hi!" yelled the old fiddler, his eyes glowing like balls of fire. "Let her rip, honeys! Make de dust fly! Whoopee! Sail in, gals! Dar's no use foolin'!"

He played away more vigorously than ever, while laughs and shouts from the floor answered his exclamations.

"Yar's de city folks. Luff 'em in, lads. Ain't dar no gal wants to dance wid de young gemmen? Sail in, honeys!"

This cry referred to Bart and Frank. The fun was so uproarious that they felt strongly inclined to take part in it. And as they found a pair of pretty girls, who had come too late for partners, and were eager for the fun, it was not long before our friends were in the thick of the glee.

The dance was one with so little system that it could be entered at any point. There had been an effort to form sets, but they had quickly dissolved, and every pair was now dancing without the least regard to order or figure.

In a minute the two young men were in the heart of the fun. They had secured lively partners, and any effort to be staid was wasted in that whirling mass. Frank and Bart danced with a vim that was new to them, wheeling through the crowd, avoiding a collision at every moment, and making the floor creak as they emulated their lively neighbors. In fact, it seemed as if it would break through under Bart's burly form, as he kicked his heels about in utter abandon.

"Talk 'bout de city folks! Why, dar de best dancers in de crowd!" cried the old fiddler, shaking his woolly head with laughter. "Go down, honeys! Dip in, little ones! Oh! de marcy! amn't it fun?"

He rose upright on the rounds of his chair, and sawed away at the same old tune, while his inspiring cries woke up the dancers to new vigor.

But it was an unlucky move for old Pomp. He had leaned too far over in his excitement, and the unbalanced chair suddenly tilted over forward, flinging its heedless occupant out over the heads of the dancers as if he had been shot from a catapult.

But game to the last, Pomp continued to play even while shooting through the air, and the last and loudest squeak from the fiddle came at the moment that he came kerswop on the heads and shoulders of three or four luckless dancers, who had not the time to get out of his way.

This broke the old darky's fall. But at that critical moment Pomp had no thought for himself. There were interests of far greater importance to defend.

"Save de fiddle!" he yelled. "Lawsee! if dat dar fiddle's bu'sted de fun's all up! Go 'way, white folks, and luff de nig see if de musical insterment am absquatulated! Bress my eyes, dar's on'y one string broke, and we's good as eber! But I's a big notion to bu'st dat cantankerous ole chair what flung me!"

And he gave the mischievous chair a kick which would have annihilated it, if it had been anything less solid.

By this time the dance had broken up in a roar of laughter; though some few of the dancers had too much steam on to cease so suddenly, and continued to whirl about, only slowly coming to a standstill. Several others who had kindly broken Pomp's fall, were limping around the room, rubbing their heads and

shoulders, and growling out anathemas against the old fiddler, whose head they felt strongly inclined to punch.

Frank and Bart clung on to their partners, who, indeed, seemed quite set up by the distinction. They were decidedly proud of being chosen to dance by the city gents, and cast looks of triumph on their less lucky friends, as they walked through the room leaning on the young men's arms.

"You must be tired and warm," said Frank, looking with interest into the flushed face of his pretty companion. "Where is the refreshment room? Cannot we get an ice?"

"Get a—what?" asked the girl, in astonishment.

"An ice."

"Why how you talk! Don't you know ther' ain't no ice this time o' year? Guess you don't have none in the city, does you?"

Frank quietly laughed. The girl was unsophisticated both in her language and her ideas. He explained that it was ice cream he meant.

"I've heered of it," she replied. "But we don't have none sich down this way. We gals generally take lemonade when we're dry. And the men generally take whisky."

Frank laughed again. He had decidedly got among odd people.

"Well, as I don't generally take whisky," he remarked, "I wouldn't mind taking a lemonade with you. Where are these beverages to be found?"

The girl eagerly drew him into an adjoining room, which had been set apart as a refreshment saloon. A considerable number had found their way in that direction before them, and were engaged much as the young lady had indicated.

The two glasses of lemonade were soon prepared, and Frank was about to take his up, when his fair friend earnestly laid her hand upon his.

"You aren't a-goin' to drink it that thin way?" she demanded. "Why, it's only water, with a trifle of sugar and vinegar. You want a stick in it to give it a body."

"A stick in it?" he asked.

It was her turn now to have the laugh on Frank. She was not long in showing him her meaning by picking up a bottle of whisky and pouring a liberal allowance into each glass.

"Now it's got some taste in it," she declared. "You're goin' to dance the next set with me, ain't you?"

"If you will let me," he replied.

"You bet I will! You're a hoss! Here's your good luck!" and she swallowed her tumbler of very stiff lemonade almost at a mouthful.

Frank began to think he had got into very strange quarters, or else that he had got hold of a very peculiar partner. Her language and tastes hardly suited his fastidious fancies, but he could not deny that she was a lively partner in a dance.

Some of the young men had grown warm with their potations, and high words were heard in one corner of the room. At that moment a preliminary shriek from old Pomp's fiddle admonished them that the sport was about to recommence. Frank and his partner hastened back to the ball-room.

Sets were being formed for an old-fashioned country dance, and they quickly sought a place, while Pomp was engaged in tuning up his violin.

Just then the door of the room opened, and several new-comers entered. Prominent among these was Bill Bounce. He had evidently been drinking.

"Riggin' up a dance, hey?" he shouted. "I'm yer donkey. That's jist my provender. Where's my Sal? Trot out here, little one."

He strode about the room, flinging his red sleeved arms around in a tipsy fashion. Frank's partner clung close to him, as if in terror.

"Where's that dratted Sal, I say? If she's a-playin' on Shanandoah Bill, shoot me if somethin' ain't goin' to git bu'sted! It's me that's talkin'."

He stopped short at that instant, with his eyes fixed on Frank and his partner, while an oath of portentous weight rolled from his lips.

"Well, I've heered of imperdence, but this takes it down," he growled, with an aspect of utter astonishment. "That thar city coon a-paradin' my Sal! Talk about takin' the rag off the bush! Why, it's enough to give a gum tree the ager. Drap that bit of calico now, afore the rhinoceros gits his dander riz."

"Who are you talking to?" asked Frank angrily.

"To you, you tailor's snip!"

"Take my advice, and slide from here, you red-nosed blower, before you are hurt," retorted

Frank. "This young lady is my partner, and I am going to dance with her if the house comes down. Don't get nervous," he continued to the girl, as he felt her hand tremble on his arm. "Bill Bounce won't hurt you, take my word for that."

He had thoughtlessly turned his face from the ruffian as he spoke. The latter, reddening with fury, stepped quickly forward, and struck Frank with the flat of his hand in the cheek.

The blow was a smarting one, and the young man seemed slightly dazed as he looked around for the source of this insult. There stood the burly ruffian, with a scornful smile on his face.

What followed was so quickly done that the spectators could hardly comprehend it. A hasty step forward. The flash of a white fist. A blow that sounded like the heavy fall of a drumstick. The crash of a burst-open door. All they knew was that Bill Bounce went headlong through that opening, and fell like a stricken ox on the hard ground outside, while Frank Frazer turned lightly back to his trembling partner, and called out to the musician:

"Strike up lively, my hearty. That set's danced out, and we're ready for the next."

CHAPTER VI.

FRANK'S FLYING SHOT.

WE must request the reader to accompany us to the flank of the mountain that rose a few miles to the east of Gordon Hall. It was thickly covered with forest, here open below, there choked with dense undergrowth, as the soil which covered the granite rock grew richer and deeper.

The afternoon was clear and sunny, though the sunshine with difficulty made its way through the close canopy of leaves overhead. Here and there, mostly beside paths that led through the thickets, men were stationed, rifle in hand, apparently in waiting for something in the shape of game. From the far distance the deep bay of hounds could be heard and a crashing of bushes as they broke through the clustered undergrowth.

On a rocky knoll in the heart of the forest stood two men whom we have met before at Mr. Smike's dinner-party, by name, Mr. Miller and Mr. Johnson. They held their rifles ready as they listened to the bay of the hounds.

"Nothing up yet," said Miller, shaking his head, "and I doubt if the game comes this way, if Smike is lucky enough to raise any. The hounds are trending toward the lower run."

"Just our luck," replied Johnson, dropping the breech of his rifle to the ground. "Those city chaps are stationed there. I suppose they will pick up what game's afoot, or else scare it with wild shooting."

"Not much; that fellow Frazer can shoot; there's no going back on that."

"At a dead mark, I give in. But he says himself that he's nothing at game on the jump."

"That's all gammon," answered Miller, decidedly. "Hav'n't you heard of the sport the other night? How he knocked that big Bill Bounce clear out through the side of a house?"

"Not as bad as that," laughed Johnson. "Through the door, you mean."

"And what came of it? I didn't hear all the story. Did Bounce take it quietly? I would have looked for some shooting."

"Quietly enough," answered Johnson. "He was knocked out of time. I'm told he was as dead as a log when his friends picked him up; they had to carry him away, and Frazer went on dancing as if it was an everyday occurrence. Who'd ever think he had it in him? He doesn't show it, but his muscles must be all spring steel."

"What was the fight about?"

"He was dancing with Bill's sweetheart, Sal Slocum. She's a pretty girl, you know, but they say she can drink more whisky than Bill himself. She must have astonished young Frazer."

"I am afraid Bill will astonish him worse," answered Miller, with a dubious shake of the head. "Sure as you live the boy will be way-laid and shot, if he stays about here."

"I am afraid so," agreed Johnson. "Ha! do you hear that, Miller? That's a new tune. The hounds have struck a covert. That's the music. But it's too low down for us."

This exclamation was occasioned by a change in the tone of the distant bay. Game was evidently afoot.

Nearly a mile to the south of where these two men stood, the mountain dipped down till it formed a valley, or wide ravine, between it and the neighboring peak. This narrow way was pretty thickly overgrown, though a wide path ran through it, made more by animals than by men.

Beside this path, though somewhat withdrawn into the thicket, stood the two city gentlemen. They were armed with rifles, and appeared to wait with impatience the approach of game.

"It's confounded dull work," growled Bart. "Here we've stood like marble statues for a good hour, while old Smike's having all the fun down yonder with his dogs. I don't know which foot I'm standing on."

"Not as lively as a Virginia reel, with a wide awake fiddler and a pretty partner, eh, Bart?"

"That was a gay shindy," answered Bart laughing. "A little bit too gay. Where did you ever learn to hit so hard?"

"Where I learned to shoot," answered Frank. "That was part of my college education."

"It all settled in your muscles, then; and none in your brain. Do you know I nearly got into trouble, too?"

"You did?"

"Yes. With young Hardy. I had his girl, as you had Bill Bounce's. The young fool got jealous as sin. I could see him grinding his teeth against the wall. It was prime fun, and I stuck to her like grim death. I've a notion to keep up the joke, just to see the young fellow squirm."

"Don't, Bart."

"Why not?"

"Jealousy's the devil when it's raised. Don't stir it up."

The music of the hounds now came ringing down the wind, borne clearly to their ears.

"They are coming this way," declared Bart. "Have they a deer afoot, think you? There's something mighty eager in their tone."

"And now they drop off into silence," remarked Frank, as he examined the lock of his weapon. "I don't know much about the signs, but that looks promising. They are too busy to yelp."

"I am good for one shot, if I fire into a tree-top," averred Bart, bringing his rifle to a ready.

The amateur sportsmen subsided into silence, and waited with some nervousness the result of the chase.

Silence reigned through the forest. Now the fall of a nut, or a rustle as if some small creature was pushing through the leaves, met their attention. At some distance the hammering of a woodpecker could be heard. To the left the scream of a cat bird came harshly to their ears. The tree-tops faintly groaned as they waved in the wind.

But the huntsmen scarcely heard these sounds. They were waiting for noises of another character.

Now, from the distance, came the short, impatient yelp of a dog. At intervals it was repeated. It seemed to be growing nearer.

"By Jove, Bart, I believe we are to be in luck!" cried Frank. "Sure as you live the chase is heading this way. Smike said, you know, the game was very like to break down this valley, to gain the east mountain. There! did you note that? It is getting warm."

"Thundering warm!" growled Bart, cocking his rifle. "And, hang me, if my nerves ain't getting shaky. How do you feel, Frank?"

"Sound as a pine knot."

"That's just like you. I don't believe you were born with any nerves. I know I'll split my aim between the deer and that mountain top."

"Then don't shoot," warned Frank. "Hist! Here it comes!"

There was a yelp, that seemed a quarter mile off to the left. But at the same moment there came a crashing of bushes below. The chase had struck the thicket.

Half-concealed amid the thick leaves, with finger on trigger the young men waited. A quick patter of feet came up the ravine. Then suddenly broke into full view the form of a noble deer, with broad branching antlers, and head erect, plunging with long leaps down the forest path.

Bart shut both eyes in his excitement. His finger incautiously pressed the trigger against which it rested. There was a loud report, a flash of flame, and the ping of the bullet as it struck a neighboring tree. The rifle fell from his unnerved hands.

For an instant the timid animal halted in its path, cast its wary eyes to right and left, and crouched as if to turn and retrace its steps. Then came a long and vigorous leap forward, and it was again in full flight.

Frank had been on the point of shooting, when Bart's unlucky shot almost destroyed their hopes. With a vexed exclamation he now sprung out into the path down which the flying deer was speeding with mighty leaps.

It was a line shot. The animal was flying directly from him. Quick as lightning the rifle came to his shoulder. His keen eyes glanced along the sights. His finger pressed the trigger. The wood again rung with a sharp report.

One, two, three more mighty leaps were made by the deer. Was he untouched? Had Frank's bullet gone astray? No, for in the fourth leap the animal came crashing in a heap to the ground, his antlers striking the soil, and tossing him over and over in the forest path.

Almost simultaneously a second rifle-shot rung through the air. But it was not aimed at the deer. For the bullet struck the barrel of Frank's rifle, not an inch from his hand, and bounded off into the thicket beyond.

"The fiends take us, if some hound isn't firing at you!" yelled Bart. "Up this way, Frank! The smoke came from the clump here to the left. Let's salt the rogue!"

Nothing loth Frank obeyed these directions. Bart's strong frame was already rending through the thicket, toward the spot whence the shot had come. Frank followed in the path thus made, setting his teeth firmly as his heart throbbed with anger against the attempted murderer.

As he went he thrust a new cartridge into the chamber of his breech-loading rifle. There might be a chance to return the murderous shot.

Very few minutes sufficed for Bart's powerful frame to burst through the screen of bushes, and come out into the open ground beyond.

He was boiling over with indignation, and it would have been a sorry day for the fellow who fired that treacherous shot, had he fallen then into Bart Wilson's strong hands.

But there was no one visible. They quickly ran up the slope to the cluster of bushes which had concealed the assassin.

"Strike for the top of that rock!" cried Frank. "It will give us a long sight."

The rock in question was a steep mass, about twenty feet in height. Up its rapidly sloping sides the young men ran, aiding themselves by catching hold of an occasional bush.

In a minute they had gained its summit. From his elevation they had a long view through the open forest which lay beyond. It was a level slope for several hundred yards. Then it became broken, thickets arose, and rough strewn rocks broke the view.

Just on the verge of this broken region the figure of a man was visible rapidly flying for the rocks beyond. He was too far off to be made out distinctly, as some intervening bushes hid the lower part of his body.

"Looks like Bill Bounce," cried Bart. "But I can't make him out very clear."

"There's one way of telling," Frank sternly rejoined. "I'll mark him, so that we will know him the next time he comes around."

The rifle was already at his shoulder. But he did not make his usual quick shot. He looked long and carefully along the sights, until Bart began to fear that the fugitive would gain shelter before he fired.

The latter, indeed, was on the very verge of a rock, which in a moment more would have hidden him, when the shot came.

He had stretched out his hand to grasp the corner of the rock to swing him behind its shelter. Suddenly the hand dropped to his side. He was seen to reel for an instant. Then he recovered himself and sprang behind the sheltering rock.

Frank quietly proceeded to reload the smoking rifle.

"We will know him the next time we meet," he remarked.

"Are you sure you hit him?"

"Didn't you see his hand fall?"

"Yes."

"He has a mark which he will carry to his grave. I fancy he won't shoot at me again for a day or two. Let us go look after our game."

CHAPTER VII.

A STERN CHASE.

FRANK and Bart moved slowly down toward their stricken deer, earnestly conversing upon the exciting event which had just happened. Had they known of all that was taking place below they might have found it advisable to quicken their footsteps.

It was but a minute or two from the time that Frank shot the deer until he made his second shot at his flying foe. The hounds, which had been distanced by the rapid animal, were not yet up, though they could be heard giving voice close to the left.

Yet a man was bending over the fallen animal. He was dressed in rough homespun, and

seemed a person of middle age, by the mottled gray of his hair. His face was concealed as he stooped low over the deer.

The voice of the hounds, and the sound of persons moving through the bushes, seemed to arouse him. He rose and looked toward the coming steps, revealing a face dark as if exposed to many suns, yet with something in its expression that did not belong to the mountaineers. There were marks of a culture which it is not easy to attain, and not easy to conceal.

Soon the faces of the young men appeared through the screen of bushes. The stranger started as if in surprise and dread. A look of dismay came into his swarthy face. Hastily turning he darted back into the bushes behind him, evidently not wishing to be seen.

"What is that?" cried Frank. "I thought I saw something move. And there is a stir in the bushes."

"Only the wind," replied Bart. "Here they come! Stir up, lovelies!"

This was addressed to the brace of hounds, which at that moment darted, with their noses down, along the forest-path. Then came a long, deep, thundering bay, that made the far aisles of the woodland ring. They had discovered the fallen prey, and were giving their native signal.

"Off with you, honey! Off with you, sweet-lips!" cried Bart, pushing aside the dogs, which had thrown themselves savagely on the body of the deer. "Back, you sleek villains! There's somebody else than you lays claim to that bit of venison."

"Where is he hit, Bart?"

"In the head. Your bullet went through his brain, I fancy. And it must have come out at the throat, for there's blood oozing there."

"I don't see how that could be," Frank bent over the slain buck. "By Jove, Bart, that's a knife cut, not a bullet mark! How came it there?"

"And here's the knife," cried Bart, picking up an ivory-handled pen-knife, that lay on the ground at his feet.

"There's something mighty curious about this," mused Frank. "I told you I saw something moving. But who is it that has been slicing our game? And how came that neat bit of cutlery into the hands of a mountaineer?"

"That gets me," rejoined Bart. "I don't take it in."

"Let me see the knife," demanded Frank, with a sudden suspicion.

He cast his keen glance on the name plate. His breath came quickly, while a sound that was half whistle, half exclamation, broke from his lips.

"Look, Bart, at those initials! N. R. By all that's good it is our man! It must have been he that sprung into the bushes when we came up!"

"Then he has seen us, and all the fat's in the fire," returned Bart.

"Not sure. We may overtake him. He got a start and dropped his knife. But he's oldish, and not used to the woods. We're young and active. This way, my boy! Leave your rifle here. There's a nobler buck afoot, but not one to be brought down by a bullet."

Dropping his rifle beside the deer, Frank sprung lightly forward, quickly followed by his companion.

In a moment the thick bushes swallowed them up. But the thicket was traversed by paths in various directions, and they made their way forward with ease and rapidity.

Not a sound came from their lips. It was no time now to waste breath in words. Like gray-hounds they coursed the thicket paths.

"Take that way, Bart," cried Frank, as the path branched. "We can meet in the open."

They separated, and darted off in different directions. The thicket in this direction was wide and close. It filled all the valley, and ran far up the slope of the opposite mountain.

But the paths followed by the pursuers led them eastward through the ravine, and deeper into the mountain region. The ground became rough as they proceeded, and they were obliged to move more slowly. Their way was obstructed by fallen logs, bowlders, and clinging vines, which threw themselves, here and there, across the paths.

After Frank had run about a mile he found himself at the mouth of a side ravine that ran southward into the mountain. A slender stream trickled down its center, giving life to a luxuriant growth of green bordering verdure.

He paused a moment here in doubt. As he did so there came a sound, as of some one approaching to his left. Frank was on the point of withdrawing warily into the bushes, when

the burly form of his friend broke into sight, tearing at full speed along an adjoining path. Their two ways had come together again at this point.

Bart's face was red as a beet, the perspiration was streaming down his face, and his breath came in short, quick puffs.

"Laws bless me, if I've ever had such a breathing before!" He snatched off his hat and vigorously fanned his face. "Such a run!—Seen anything, Frank?—Hang me if I have!—Bless my eyes—I'm most—gone under!"

He flung off his coat and threw himself on the grass to recover at will.

Frank could not help laughing at the broken exclamations of his friend.

"Yes—you can laugh.—A skeleton like you—all steel and whalebone—no wonder you can run.—But shoot me if I've been trained for a racer."

"All right, Bart, my boy. Take a rest till you get your breath. He has doubled on us somewhere, and there's no use running. We've tried our legs. We will have to try our wits now."

"It would be very easy to try them if we had any," growled Bart. "But I don't lay claim to an ounce of brains, and I doubt if you can discount me."

Frank continued to laugh, while a low whistled tune came from his lips, as he looked musingly to right and left through the thicket.

Five minutes passed, broken only by occasional grumbling remarks from Bart, who continued to fan his overheated face.

"Feel better?" asked Frank.

"A trifle. I am beginning to breathe like a Christian and a gentleman."

"Then bathe your face in this water. It's cool and sweet, and will do you good."

Bart obeyed these directions, and added to them a long draught from the clear running stream.

"There! Richard's himself again."

He rose and put on his coat and hat.

"And now, Frank, you've been beating your brains; what have you got out of them? Shall we go on, or back?"

"It's all blind," answered Frank, "we must trust to chance. I wish we had brought the hounds, but it's doubtful if they would be worth their salt at man-tracking. I vote we try this side ravine and see what it leads to."

"I'm agreeable to anything; as I told you, I don't pretend to have any brains, and not much legs either."

"You make it up in arms, then," answered Frank, as he looked at the broad shoulders and muscular limbs of his friend. "I can hit a sharp blow, but if it comes to a hug, you're the man. My fist and your shoulders may be needed before we get through this job—come on, my boy, if you're ready."

He led up the side ravine. It was not nearly a level, like the paths they had followed, but stretched upward at a long slope. The thicket continued, and the path they followed was hardly broken, so that they had at points to force their way through the clustering bushes; nor was this altogether agreeable, since thorny brambles frequently protruded into the path.

The ground, too, was far from level, and they were both well satisfied when, after twenty minutes' progress, they emerged into a clear spot of perhaps a quarter of an acre in extent, forming a rocky knoll in the center of the bushy thicket.

Forward from this knoll the wood was more open. Before them towered the steep sides of a mountain mass. To right and left ran depressions, leading deeper into the heart of the range.

"Hist!" said Frank, warningly. "There are sounds in the distance, and they seem coming this way. Let us back into ambush. There may be something in the wind for us."

In a minute they had retreated into the bushes, forcing themselves deeply under covert and arranging the leaves so as to remove the traces of their entrance. From where they lay they could readily look out upon the knoll with little danger of being observed in return.

The sounds which had warned Frank grew quickly louder. Soon two men emerged from the opposite thicket and paused as they came into the open space. Their observers recognized them at a glance as some of the rough fellows who had accompanied Bill Bounce on the night of the dance.

They engaged in conversation as they stood there.

"What way now?" asked one. "Shall we head for the town, and a swig of red-eye? Wonder where Bill is."

"Down that way, somewhar. Ther' was a

bark as sounded like his old piece. Mebbe he's took part in old Smike's deer hunt."

"If he gits a show at a buck, he'll fetch it, you bet," laughed the other. "Here comes some chap now, 'long the path. Like as not it's Bill."

They waited while the approaching steps came momentarily nearer. Soon there emerged upon the knoll the person they had expected to see, the burly figure of Bill Bounce.

But he presented a most rueful and woe-begone aspect. His face was pale and haggard. He walked heavily, and dragged his rifle as if its weight was too much for him. His clothes were streaked with blood, which seemed to have flowed freely over him. His left hand was tied tightly in a large handkerchief, which was now dyed a deep red, whatever was its original hue.

He gave a groan of satisfaction on perceiving his friends.

"Why, hello, Bill, what's wrong?" cried they, springing toward him.

Bill halted, while a sour expression overspread his face.

"Only a tussle with a b'ar," he growled. "But you never see'd such a slashin' tug. Up and down. Underholt and overholt. Ef it had been anybody but Shanandoah Bill he'd been chewed up alive. But it's jis' my provender to wrastle with b'ars."

"Did he git off?" cried the others, looking with admiration on the hero of the bear fight.

"Yes, dang his shaggy hide! An' tuk a bit of me off with him."

"How's that, Bill? Are you bad hurt?"

"He chewed off my little finger, that's all," growled Bill. "You never see'd sich a tussle, now let me tell you. But I'm kinder weak, fellers. Can't ye tote me 'long? Guess I've wasted 'bout a bucketful of blood."

The two men hastened to comply, with much show of feeling for Bill's hurt.

"I'm goin' to git even with that b'ar," he declared, as they moved off. "I know his hole, and if I don't plug him, shoot me! Bill Bounce, the buzzard of the Alleghanies, ain't goin' to be chewed up fer nuthin'."

"Do you hear that, Frank?" whispered Bart.

"I told you I'd mark him," answered Frank. "And if he knows when he's well off he'd best keep clear of that bear. It might chaw off another finger."

CHAPTER VIII.

A PRISONER IN SPIKE OF HIMSELF.

"HEREAWAY!" cried Mr. Smike, as he came briskly up the glen. "Where are you, good boys? Speak out, cheery lads!"

His lively call was answered by a whimper from the hounds. Directed by this sound the hunter hurried forward, repeating his calls as he did so.

Soon he emerged from the thickly-grown path into a more open space. Before his pleased eyes lay the antlered form of the slain buck, beside which were stretched the lank forms of the hounds, their tongues lolling, as they breathed hard after their exertions.

They sprung lazily to their feet, and stood stretching themselves as they awaited their master's approach.

"Good dogs!" he cried, patting their heads. "Have you pulled down the buck yourselves? Royal fellows! But I heard shots. And here's where our city boys were placed. What has flown away with them?"

He stooped, and examined the game, while the dogs fawned upon him.

"Why, you lying brutes it wasn't you after all! There's a bullet-hole through the creature's brain. And you taking a credit that didn't belong to you! Shame on you! I wouldn't have believed that of dogs trained by me!"

The intelligent creatures slunk away with downcast heads, as if they understood his meaning.

"But what's become of Frank and Bart? There's something confounded odd about this. Here lay their rifles, and not a sign of them about. I can't make it out."

Patting his hand to his mouth he gave vent to a succession of calls, and view halloos, that rung far away along the mountain flanks.

"Hillo! Whereaway? Whereaway? Tally-ho-ho-ho!"

The shrill cry pealed through the clear mountain air, the dogs lifting their long ears, as if ready to start in full course.

"Down, lads," commanded Smike, quietly taking a huge bite of tobacco, which he rolled with satisfaction into his right cheek. "If they are within hearing that will fetch them."

A faint, but distinct "hillo!" came from afar, in response to his call.

In a few minutes more a rustling sound was heard in the bushes to the left, and soon the forms of Frank and Bart emerged into view.

"Where in the blue blazes have you been?" demanded Smike, with spleen. "Who ever heard of a pair of green hands shooting a ten-year-old buck, and then straying off into the bushes to pick gooseberries?"

"Nobody, I fancy," laughed Frank. "We've been after richer fruit than gooseberries, and nobler game than bucks."

"Nobler game? There is no nobler game!" Smike declared. "A buck of ten times, like that! But come; out with your story. What drew you away?"

"A runaway that left a golden trail," rejoined Frank. "You know our errand here, and we can speak freely to you, before there are any other ears about. It was Norman Rand himself. We chased him far through the thicket, but he gave us the slip."

Smike put his hands on his knees; half doubled himself, and gave a shrill whistle of surprise.

"Norman Rand! By all that's lucky! Is there no mistake, lads? Why, that bit of game would be worth a mountain full of bucks!"

"There's no doubt of it," answered Frank, confidently. "Sit down here, and we will go over the story."

Taking a comfortable seat on a fallen log that lay near them, Frank proceeded to detail their adventures, up to the point in which Bill Bounce had told of his tussle with the bear.

The Virginian gave another whistle of surprise.

"Do you want to tell an old coon like me that you took off Bill's finger with a bullet? And at a long range? Hang it all, Frazer, that cock won't fight."

"I don't swallow it," declared Bart. "It was the bear bit it off."

"Maybe it was," answered Frank, calmly. "It's gone, anyhow. Well, to shorten my story, we followed them about a mile further through the mountains. There they brought up at a hut, built in an open glade, on the east slope of the hills. Do you know the spot?"

Smike shook his head.

"Not me. I didn't know there was any settlement thereaway."

"I can tell you about it," came a voice near them.

They hastily turned. There stood the old fellow who had settled Bill Bounce on the day of the shooting-match. It was Old Tom Turnstile, who had approached unobserved. He bore a long-barreled rifle upon his shoulder, and was looking down on the deer.

"A neat bit of game that," he remarked.

"Yes," cried Frank shortly. "But you know that mountain hut! Whose is it?"

"It's a sort of loafin' place for Shanandoah Bill and his gang," answered the old man. "A good spot to sample red-eye. When they want to get blazin' drunk that's their hole. And there's worse nor that goes on, I'm afeared."

The conversation continued for some minutes longer, the old man revealing much information about the lurking-places of the ruffianly gang. There were few spots in the mountains which were not known to him.

"I don't b'lieve they're quite saints," he averred. "There's more than what's Christian-like goes on among that gang."

He was interrupted by approaching steps, as some other members of the hunting-party came up.

While this conversation continued, other events of interest were taking place in the woods. One reason of the unsuccessful character of the chase made by the two young men was that it had been too rapid. They had overrun their game. A slower and more watchful pursuit might have proved more successful.

For a pair of alert eyes had watched their rapid progress with a mixture of fright and cunning. The owner of those eyes moved not from his covert until their return. Hidden in impenetrable shade he watched them until they had vanished in the distance. Then, from a dense clump of bushes, in which he lay couched like a rabbit in its hiding-place, crept out the fugitive, with a slow, snaky movement. His cheek was pale and his lips trembling, as he looked down the path.

"I am pursued even here!" he muttered. "And by that pair of blood-hounds! I thought I was hidden beyond the reach of danger, and suddenly those two faces break upon me from the thicket. What shall I do? Shall I fly further? They are after me, I know. Nothing else would have brought them here."

There was a look of irresolution upon his face, as, with steps that trembled despite himself, he made his way along the mountain path.

"Fool as I was, to halt over that deer!" he continued. "And that I should try to cut the throat of the poor thing, that seemed to me not dead. I fear I have cut my own throat by my folly. My knife has gone, and may have fallen into their hands."

He walked on with difficulty. His feet were evidently not used to the mountain paths.

An hour afterward his slow walk brought him to that concealed glade in which Frank and Bart had discovered the hut of the mountaineers.

It was a beautiful opening in the center of the forest, covered with a thick carpet of grass, in the midst of which burst out a cool spring, whose clear waters ran in a narrow channel down the dale.

One side of this opening was occupied by a log hut, of some size, though very rudely built. Yet its very rudeness seemed in harmony with its surroundings. It had some of nature's charm of picturesque wildness.

In front of this hut were several roughly-dressed and evil-faced men. Among them was Shanandoah Bill, whose wound had been dressed, and who seemed more comfortable.

The new-comer advanced rapidly toward them, his face full of apprehension.

"I have been chased through the mountains!" he cried. "The blood-hounds are on my track! I call on you, gentlemen, for protection. You pledged yourselves that I should not be taken."

"I don't see as you've been gobbled up 'it," growled one of the mountaineers. "And with that rig, and the walnut juice on your face, your own mother wouldn't know you. You needn't be afeared."

"They knew me!" cried the fugitive pitifully. "They chased me like sleuth-hounds! There is no safety for me, now that they are on my track!"

"And what the deuce then takes you flirtn' round, like a pig that's lost its cob?" grumbled Bill, as his pallid face put on a sour look. "Why can't ye keep shady round yere, 'stead of diggin' 'bout whar you's got no bizness? Ef you're goin' to poke yer old nose inter every fool's face, you can't 'spect us to look arter you."

A flush of anger came into the brown-hued face of the stranger. Some sharp retort seemed on his lips, but he repressed it. He could not afford to turn these men against him.

"Who is it that's on your track?" asked another of the men. "Is it the officers?"

"Yes. The blood-hounds of the law. They had just shot a deer. I was bending over it, when I looked up and saw their faces. I ran for my life, but they chased me terribly. They were in this glen. They may have seen this very spot."

A violent oath broke from Bill's lips. His face grew paler, as from a twinge of pain.

"Fire and blazes!" he yelled. "I know them now! It's the two Baltimore bucks! It's the chap as won the shocotin'-match, and his pard! May the foul fiend fly away with the pair of 'em!"

"The feller as knocked you to baste at the shindig," said another, with a wide grin.

"None of that, Phil," was the savage reply. "Jist take my advice and don't try that on Bill Bounce. Don't ye come grinnin' round this chicken, or you'll see streak lightning, afore you know what's what."

He half rose to his feet, with an angry glare. But the pain of his wound admonished him, and he sunk back with a groan.

"I hoped I was safe here!" exclaimed the trembling fugitive, wringing his hands in dismay. "But I must fly again. I must seek a new hiding-place. You shall be well paid, gentlemen, for your protection. But I must go on."

A look of odd meaning passed between Bill and his accomplices.

"Don't ye be feared," said the ruffian, with a cunning leer. "Jist keep cool. If them there chaps comes in reach of old Betsy, ye'll see rank p'izen waked up. Now mind that."

"I must fly!" persisted the fugitive. "I dare not stay here!"

"We can't spare you," remarked one of the ruffians, in a decisive tone. "We've made up our mind to take keer of you—and your cash."

There was something unpleasantly suggestive in the tone in which this was said, and in the look which passed between the mountaineers.

"But my money is not here," cried the old fellow, with a pitiful look. "I will send for some. I will pay you well for your kindness. Only let me go."

"Mebbe you best," was the fierce reply. "Ye're not goin' back on us. If you don't fork over, we'll jist plant you in a holler tree and set fire to it. That's us."

The prisoner, as he seemed to be, gazed with a shudder into the circle of savage faces.

"But it isn't safe round yere for Mr Rand," declared another. "If they've tracked him yere they've got the open sights on us."

"I move we take the old gentleman over to the fox-hole," advised a third. "There's where they'll never smell him out."

"Let 'em come yere," roared Bill. "If they want fight that's jist my provender. The Alleghany buzzard aren't goin' to take water fer a brace of Baltimore counter-jumpers, nary time."

"Take me to the other place!" demanded Mr. Rand. "I am afraid to remain here! They have tracked me here! Take me to the other place, gentlemen!"

It was finally agreed that this was the wisest course, and one of the mountaineers was sent to conduct their precious guest over the hills to the hiding-place, which they called the "fox-hole." The others remained until they could come to a decision as to their future movements.

"And if them Baltimore bloods come yere," declared Bill, "I've got a trigger-finger and a sound eye yet; I'm a-goin' to plug that slim-built hound if I hang fer it. That's Shanandoah Bill's say. Mind me!"

CHAPTER IX.

ON A BLIND TRAIL.

ON the morning succeeding the day of the deer-hunt a small procession filed through the woods toward the mountain hut of the ruffianly gang. Old Tom Turnstile led the van, followed by Frank and Bart in Indian-file, while Mr. Smike made up the rear. The latter was savagely chewing, while the expression of his face showed great dissatisfaction with this enterprise.

"They're murdering devils," he complained; "they'll show fight; we might as well poke our heads into a bear's den at once."

"You don't fear them, Mr. Smike?" asked Frank.

"Fear them? I don't fear anything," exclaimed Smike, valiantly, "but we're not strong enough. If we had a half-dozen more stout fellows, now, I'd be very glad to act as rear guard."

A laugh at Smike's idea of valor came from the others.

"There are us four and the law," declared Bart, "that's as good as a baker's dozen."

"Less noise," warned Old Tom. "We're gettin' close up. It's no time fer cacklin' when game's in ear-shot."

This petulant remark silenced them, and they quietly followed for some distance further. After a few minutes their guide halted.

"The spot is just ahead," he whispered. "Hang back here while I forge a bit forward and spy 'em out."

Without waiting for an answer he pushed on, and was quickly lost in the windings of the path. The others quietly waited, resting on their weapons and conversing in low tones. Five minutes elapsed, and then the old scout returned with a dubious look.

"I'm afeared they've cut stick," he declared. "It's like a graveyard 'bout there. But it mought be an ambush. If ye'll step forward to the edge, and cover me, I'll worm in. Don't do to peg in too suddent on that kind of vermin."

A few minutes more found the party on the edge of the open glade. The sun was shining warmly down on its carpet of verdure, but no sign of human life was anywhere present. The closed hut stood quiet and solitary.

Flinging himself at full length on the ground, old Tom wormed himself forward, in a snaky fashion. He had evidently practiced the same movement before, in his hunting excursions, for he made his way onward with considerable rapidity, while his form scarcely appeared above the long grass.

Soon he was beside the hut. Lifting his head he sought to look through the cracks in the ill-fitting woodwork. His companions, with ready rifles, stood prepared to defend him, should he be assailed by any lurking inmates of the hut.

A moment of anxiety followed. They were not used to work of this sort, and knew that they had desperate characters to deal with. A battle for life might be necessary ere they could take their prisoner.

Suddenly old Tom sprang to his feet with an assuring whoop.

"It's as empty as a meal-bag after a winter's

bakin'," he declared. "The hounds has cut stick. There's not hair nor hide on 'em here. They've took the cue and slid, hang 'em."

At this appeal his comrades came hastily forward. Old Tom had meanwhile thrown open the door of the hut, and entered.

"Slid," he briefly declared. "Vamosed. They've either shet up, and gone on a ramp; or else they've took your man on to some of their hidin'-places. They know more nor one, in the mountings."

A close examination of the hut decided them in favor of the latter view. Much of its sparse furniture had disappeared, particularly the bedding. Frank made a keen investigation, and soon discovered positive evidences that the fugitive had indeed been concealed there.

"There's no mistake about it," he averred. "See here, if you want proof of high civilization."

He held up a well-worn tooth-brush, which he had discovered in an obscure corner. Old Tom looked at it in surprise.

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

"Didn't I tell you?" laughed Frank. "A tooth-brush is proof positive of high culture. Our man has been here."

With a sniff of disgust at such ridiculous fashions, old Tom left the hut. He preferred to clean his teeth on bacon and venison-steak. When they came out they found him, with his head well to the ground, moving slowly toward the opposite side of the glade. They looked curiously at his movements, not knowing just what to make of them.

At length he raised his head, with an air of satisfaction.

"Tooth-brushes is very rich," he remarked, "but an old hunter's eyes is good for some at too. 'Tain't every greenhorn as can pick up a trail, out of wild tramping like this round here. This way they went, I'll sell my head on it."

He pointed to where a path opened southward through the thicket. Instantly his followers were on the alert.

"Can you lead us to their hiding-place?"

The old man shook his head.

"It's plain enough here. But it'll soon strike bare rock, where a dog couldn't nose it. However, we mought try."

Dropping his rifle to a carry, he strode briskly forward. The others fell into his track. The path they followed was a narrow one, level for some distance, and then sloping up the mountain side.

And ere they had gone half a mile all trace of undergrowth had disappeared. The forest that clothed the mountain flank, still bent its leafy arches over their heads, but the soil was thin and almost bare. Only an occasional shrub, a few blades of grass, and some mosses and lichens, marked its surface.

The scout moved forward less rapidly, with his keen eyes to the ground.

Their path still climbed the mountain-side. As they reached a higher elevation the trees became more scattered, and the thin soil was here and there replaced by patches of bare rock.

When the trail struck these it became difficult to take it up again. Little effort had been made to hide it, but the thin, bare soil was almost as hard as the solid rock. Here a foot-mark, in a clump of moss, there a broken twig, yonder a patch of wet leaves which had been recently disturbed, told the story of the flight, and the progress became slow and laborious.

Finally a locality was reached, far up on the mountain, in which the forest ceased. For a considerable distance the rock was utterly bare of soil, and so broken and rugged that passage over it became difficult.

"I thought as much," remarked Tom, shaking his head. "I reckoned they'd strike up here. They don't keer to be follered, and there's a good mile of this open. And a desp'rat rough way it is. I'm doubtful 'bout pickin' up the trail ag'in."

By his advice they rested, while he made his way forward alone. They were quite ready for this. Young as they were in comparison with the old man, they had not been trained to mountain travel, and their morning's work had been no trifle. But Old Tom sprung forward over the rough rocks as briskly as though his limbs were young and fresh.

For an hour they patiently waited, reclining on convenient rocks, and conversing upon their difficult enterprise, and the causes which had led to it.

At the end of that time the old scout reappeared. Not over the rocks, however, but by an easier passage through the lower range of woodland.

"No returns," he declared, shaking his grizzled head. "The trail's pegged out. They're keen hands, them fellers, and they've flung us. That's the long and short of it."

"By Jupiter, then, I for one won't stay flung!" exclaimed Frank, springing resolutely to his feet. "I will hunt down the villain if he trails me to Texas. Likely enough he has left these fellows now, and struck out for new quarters."

"No," answered Old Tom shrewdly. "They wouldn't have troubled themselves to hide their trail. He's with them yet."

"See here, old man," broke in Bart. "You're just the chap for our money. Suppose we put this job into your hands. The hounds can't be easy. They'll be digging over the hills, and into the towns. Can't you waylay and track them? We'll make it worth your while."

"The man you are after is a fugitive from justice?"

"Yes."

"And how much will it be worth to me?"

"A hundred dollars, if you put us on his track," said Frank.

"Then I'm your man. I go in for the law, flat-footed! And I know these mountings like you know a book. If Old Tom Turnstile can't fetch 'em there's no use anybody tryin'. You can take things easy, gentlemen. But be ready when I give the word."

"You can depend on us," answered Frank. "Give us the cue once, and we'll engage to play the play to the end."

Shouldering their rifles they took up their path toward the town. There was nothing more to be done just then.

While this search was going on, the object of it was far from being at ease. He had roused that morning after a useless effort at sleep. It was undoubtedly full day, his watch told him that. Yet a dense darkness, only broken by the feeble rays of a distant lamp, surrounded him. The floor upon which he stood was rough and hard. His outstretched hand touched a rocky wall. He made his way cautiously toward the light.

He was, in fact, in a cavern. Not a deep nor wide one, it is true. It was simply a large rock opening, which the gang who occasionally occupied it had christened the "fox-hole," but it sufficed for the concealment of their precious prisoner.

On reaching the light the mouth of the cavern became plainly visible. It was masked with thick bushes, so that only a shadowy gleam of the daylight could penetrate its dim recesses.

On a flat stone near the entrance sat the hard-faced man who had guided the fugitive to this retreat. There was a pipe between his lips. He held in his hands the barrel of his rifle, which he was carefully cleaning.

"Mornin' ter yer," he remarked, without removing his pipe. "Hope yer slept sound and hearty."

Mr. Rand looked cautiously around him.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Reckon so. Nobody else yere, 'cept you."

The fugitive seated himself near his savage-looking guard.

"You gentlemen are not going to keep me a prisoner?" he queried, in a wheedling tone. "I have kept my bargain with you. I will pay you well. But I must go on. I am not safe here."

"S'pose we can't look arter you? Ye ain't tryin' to insult us, hey?"

"A bargain is a bargain," answered Mr. Rand. "I engaged you to protect me. I need your aid no longer, and release you from it."

"We ain't that kind," growled the man, as he placed the rifle barrel in the stock. "We're goin' to take care of you while—"

"While what?"

"While yer pile holds out. Don't suppose we're fools enough to fling away a bag o' gold dust, does ye?"

"But that is treachery! it is sheer robbery!" declared the indignant prisoner.

"Well, who said we was saints or angels, hey? S'pose ye pick yer words a bit better, old man."

Old Rand again looked cautiously around, while a cunning look came into his face.

"It might be worth your while to let me go," he said. "You are alone. What need you care for these men. I will make you rich."

"And they will kill me."

"They would have to find you first," pleaded the old fugitive. He saw that he had touched a weak point in his captor's heart. "I will give you money enough to enable you to put yourself entirely beyond their reach. Only guide me from this place to a place of safety."

A doubtful look came upon the villain's face.

He rose and walked to the door of the cave. All seemed still without. He came back.

"How much?"

"A thousand dollars."

"Thousand devils! Do you take me for a fool? Say five thousand."

"I am making you a liberal offer. You want to beggar me," whined old Rand.

"Five thousand or not a cent."

The old fugitive continued to bargain, but his guard was resolute, and he finally gave in. He saw plainly that his present captors intended to beggar him, and that he must escape them at any sacrifice.

"Ready then. Now or never's our time. Brace yerself up, and we'll streak for liberty and fortune. And a fig fur Shanandoah Bill and his cronies."

A look of joy came upon the prisoner's scared face. He ran to gather up his few effects. He was hurrying back toward the mouth of the cave, when a warning hiss from his companion came to his ears.

A flood of light burst in through the opened bushes, and to the fugitive's utter dismay the members of the gang streamed into the cave, Bill crying out:

"Thought ye mought be havin' a lonely time of it, and we'd jist drop round and see ye."

CHAPTER X.

THE WORK OF JEALOUSY.

A WEEK passed by. Old Tom was still busy on the task he had undertaken, but no report had come from him. Evidently he was not yet on the track of the gang.

The two young men amused themselves as best they could while waiting with some impatience. They had left Mr. Smike's, and were now at the hotel in the village of Sumter, so as to be on hand if needed.

But they were too full of life to rest easy, and Bart renewed his acquaintance with Sue Wilder, his partner on the night of the dance. She was a lively, whole-souled girl, and he managed to drop around to the front gate of her residence every day; not at all to the comfort of young Hardy, who was her acknowledged lover.

"See here, Bart," cried Frank. "This won't do. Hardy will cut your throat if it goes on. Don't you see that he is boiling over with jealousy?"

"Bless you, I am only after a little pastime," declared Bart.

"But you are turning the girl's head. She has utterly jilted her old lover. It won't do. He is a good fellow. We must not make an enemy of him."

"You're as bad," protested Bart. "I saw you chatting with Sal Slocum over the garden gate yesterday."

"That's another matter," laughed Frank. "I don't care how jealous I make her lover. I've a notion that Bill Bounce owes me no good will now."

While they were conversing, the jilted lover was walking slowly along, outside the town, with downcast head, and a very gloomy face. He had just met with a decided rebuff from Sue, and was suffering all the pains of jealousy.

They had, in fact, come to hard words. He had accused her of flirting. She had denied his right to control her actions. One word had led to another until he had torn away, mad with jealousy and anger, and ready for any revenge on his rival that might offer itself.

In this mood he suddenly found himself face to face with Shenandoah Bill, who was making his way toward the town. Bill's left hand was closely tied up, but he seemed to have recovered his strength. His face was bitter with suppressed anger.

"See yere, Tim Hardy," he cried. "Jist pile in what ye know 'bout them city chaps. Is they rootin' round Sumter, hey?"

"Yes, confound them!" blurted out the angry lover.

Bill looked up in surprise.

"Then ye're not swimmin' on their side yerself, I reckon?"

"One of them's cut me out from from my gal," acknowledged Hardy. "And t'other's goin' in flat-footed fer yourn. I don't like these city bloods comin' here, and makin' fools of our gals."

"By the blasted rip-staver!" roared Bill, "I don't like 'em fur nothin'. You kin bet high on that. Yer ain't goin' to stand sich a monkey cuttin' you out o' yer gal, hey?"

"Not if I know myself," declared Hardy, with gloomy resolution.

"Come yere, then," cried Bill. "Ye'r jist the feller I want. Let's squat down on this yere stone, and have a chat."

The place where they met was withdrawn from observation, and for an hour the hardened villain and the jealous lover plotted together, both of them desperately bent on revenge, though for very different reasons.

At the same time Old Tom walked along the road near which the plotters were concealed. They were almost within ear-shot, yet they might have been a hundred miles off for all he was aware of their proximity.

The old fellow was worried and put out by his lack of success. A week's effort, and he had not yet struck a shadow of a trail.

"I'm tempted to throw up the job," he said to Frank and Bart on meeting them an hour afterward. "I've done my level best, but they're layin' desp'rat' low. I've tried the mounting's for six miles round, and ain't twigged a shader."

"But they must show themselves," Frank assured him. "They are not provisioned for a siege. Keep at it, old man. Some of them must show themselves before long."

"Tell you what," remarked Tom. "Mebbe my old eyes ain't got the vartue they once had. I'd like to take young Hardy into this bizness. He's got a nose like a hound, and a pair of eyes like gimlets. There's mighty good s'uff in the boy."

"You can't get him," laughed Bart. "He is ready to cut my throat now."

"What for?"

"Making love to his girl."

"Then take an old feller's advice and drop that. You don't know the lad like I do. He's just a little devil when he's roused. What do you want with the gal?"

"Nothing but to kill time."

"Then jist drop it. Ye're killin' more than time. I'll see Tim. But he's a surly little rascal when he gits his back up. I'm afeared he won't take hold."

It was near the gate of the Slocum residence that Old Tom met the jilted lover. Looking to see that he was not observed he broached the subject to him, told him the character of the enterprise he had in hand, and that he wanted his aid.

Hardy listened quietly till he was through.

"It's against Bill Bounce and in favor of these city chaps you're working?"

"Yes," was the answer.

"Then 'm not with you."

"Why?"

"'Cause I hate them like p'izen." The young man's face worked with rage. "I'd sooner cut their throats than lift a hand for them!"

"What! After all that Mr. Frazer has done for you?"

"I'm not to be bought with his paltry money," said Tim. "It's a bribe to keep me quiet while they rob me of all I love in the world. You know I'd lay down in the dust and let Sue Wilder walk over me. But here come these fine gentlemen to make a baby of me and to ruin the girl. And they try to buy me! To buy me with their dirty money! If I stood that I'd be worse than a dog!"

"They don't mean anything of the kind," protested Tom. "That's all wild jealousy."

"Don't talk to me!" persisted Hardy. "I know them! I know their tricks! I will throw his cash in his teeth! And I'll shoot myself if I don't get even with the pair of them!"

He ran furiously away, too full of his jealous idea, and his thirst for revenge, to be open to reason, or to listen to the homely good sense of the old man.

Tom shook his head dubiously.

"A young fool is the wust sort of fool," he averred. "You mought as well talk, jist now, to a crocodile. There was always a bit of wildness in the family, anyhow. The old man had it, and Tim took it from him. He's as crazy now as a March hare, and it's all with jealousy. I'll go see Sue and tell her what she's doin'. She's got sense enough to know which side her bread's buttered."

Old Tom continued to shake his grizzled head as he walked on. He did not like the complication of affairs. Hardly had he gone ere the buxom form of Sal Slocum appeared from behind a flower bush in the garden. Her face was full of anxious interest.

"There's more in it nor you see, Old Tom," she declared. "There's deviltry afoot, or I don't know nothin' 'bout men's faces. But they are not goin' to harm Mr. Frazer while Sal Slocum is about. He's a gentleman, and Bill Bounce is the wust show of a rascal, and he's got me to look out fer."

Two days after the date of this conversation Frank Frazer received a note by the hands of a youthful messenger. It was written on a soiled

piece of paper, which was rather crushed together than folded. He had great difficulty in making out the writing, which was in pencil, and very rudely performed. After some trouble he managed to read the following:

"I've got them nailed at last. Meet me at Bill Bounce's old hut in the mountains. I've got to keep round here, fer fear they give me the slip again. Don't lose any time coming, for they are slippery coons. TOM TURNSTILE."

We have considerably improved the spelling of the document. It was a remarkable specimen of English as it read.

It was now two o'clock in the afternoon. Bart was absent. He had gone that morning on a business visit to Mr. Smike. But without a moment's suspicion of anything wrong, Frank left a note for his friend, armed himself only with a small pocket-pistol, and set out alone for the place of rendezvous.

It was a bright autumn afternoon, and he enjoyed the clear, bracing air as he walked rapidly along the mountain paths. An occasional rabbit scurrying over the fallen leaves, or the flash of a bird's wing in the trees, were the only signs of life. But all was fresh, clear, and pleasant, and he found the walk delightful.

Ere long he passed the spot where he had shot the deer, and turned into the paths through which he had so ardently pursued his human game. Up the side-ravine by the flowing rivulet, and across the low mountain-ridge, and he quickly found himself on the edge of the clearing, at one side of which stood the log-hut.

It was his third visit to this locality. All was as quiet as at the time of his second visit. There were no signs of life.

"Old Tom must be off in the woods somewhere," remarked Frank, to himself. "Or maybe he is asleep in that palatial habitation. It would be a neat sell if I could catch the old hunter napping."

With a quiet laugh he approached the hut, not a suspicion of anything wrong crossing his mind.

All continued silent. He pushed open the door and entered. There was a man seated by the table that occupied the center of the floor, but to his surprise, instead of the old hunter, he recognized the form of young Hardy. He was alone in the hut, and viewed the entrance of his enemy with a stern expression.

"You here!" cried Frank. "I did not expect to see you."

"Where is your friend?" asked Hardy, the wild look of madness in his eyes.

"He is not here. What do you want with him?"

"I wanted him for a witness," was the stern reply. "Just count that cash, and tell me if it's all right."

He pushed a roll of bills toward his visitor. With surprise Frank opened and counted it. There were just two hundred dollars.

"We are square on that transaction," said the young man bitterly. "Put it in your pocket, and that will do for receipt.—But, there's another bizness we're not square on."

"What do you mean?" cried Frank, growing angry in his turn. "Are you going out of your senses, Hardy?"

He looked, indeed, as if he was, for there was the glare of insanity in his eyes.

"I mean that you're a pair of treacherous rascals!" exclaimed Hardy, moving toward the door. "You come here to rob me of her I love! You come here to ruin her! You seek to buy me till you can carry out your devilish plot! To buy me, I say! But I fling your money in your face! I am clear of you now, and I will have revenge! By the gods, I will have revenge!"

Flinging the door open he rushed wildly out. Frank stood a moment stupefied with amazement. Then with a look of concern he followed the crazed lover to the door.

But he was destined to a greater surprise, for at that moment the forms of three stalwart men closed up the doorway, the surly face of Bill Bounce in advance.

"Not so fast, my young buck!" he sneeringly remarked. "Hardy's settled his account with ye, but Shanandoah Bill is got his to settle yit, and he held up his wounded hand warningly."

"Trapped!" exclaimed Frank, retreating a step back.

"Wal, it looks that way," answered Bill, as he and his comrades crowded into the hut.

CHAPTER XI.

REMORSE FOLLOWS TREACHERY.

Two hours after Frank had set out in response to the treacherous note, Bart returned. He

came whistling into the hotel, and flung his hat carelessly on a table.

"Where's Mr. Frazer?" he asked, in a cheery way, of the landlord.

"Gone out, this two hours. He left this for you."

The rubicund host handed his guest a folded bit of paper.

Bart took and carelessly opened it. But his face grew grave as he read its contents.

"Two hours ago, you say?"

"Yes. Thereabout."

The young man struck up his tune again, but it was not the careless whistle of before. He strolled out into the porch, again reading the note.

"Got word from old Tom, eh? On the track of the rascal at last. That's comfortable. But, somehow I don't like it. Frank ought to have waited for me. He's a hasty reprobate, and is just the fellow to jump into trouble. Think I'd best strike out after him."

He stood with one foot on a chair, and his chin on his elbow, his eyes ranging heedlessly down the street, as these thoughts ran through his mind.

Suddenly he started, as a man's form turned a street corner near him, and approached the hotel.

"Old Tom now!" he cried, slapping his knee with energy. "Then where is the boy? By Jupiter, I smell deviltry back of all this. Hey, old man!"

The old fellow turned at this call, and saw Bart's beckoning hand. He came quickly up.

"How goes the chase?"

"All blue yet." The old man shook his head.

"Haven't struck ile so far."

"Then what did you mean by writing to Mr. Frazer, and telling him to meet you at the old hut in the mountains, and that you were safely on their track?"

"Me? Why, I never writ a word in my life! Laws bless ye, boy, we've somethin' else to do, hereaway."

"The deuce! It is as I feared! Then the boy is in a mint of trouble, and we've got to let out like sin. Brace yourself up, my hearty. We must not let the grass grow under our feet now."

"What's afoot?" asked Tom, in surprise.

A few quick words sufficed to tell him. He stood cogitating, while Bart hurried back into the hotel, to prepare for their journey.

"It's not Bill as done it," the old man informed him, on his return. "They know no more 'bout writin' than so many screech-owls."

"Who was it then?"

"Young Tim Hardy."

"Hardy? The deuce! It can't be!"

"Nobody shorter," persisted Old Tom. "You've been foolin' 'round his gal, and he's wild with jealousy. It's none too smart a breed, anyhow. The daddy used to have wild spells. The boy was clean daft when I talked to him, t'other day."

Bart whistled in surprise.

"Goodness! A fellow can't spark a pretty girl around here without setting her lover crazy! That's rich! Come, let's strike out."

But we must precede them somewhat in their journey. They were not the only ones who had the welfare of Frank Frazer at heart, and who had set out for his rescue.

Along the mountain-path for which they were striking a sure-footed lass was already making her way. She was dressed in a short gown of strong homespun, which defied the wayside briars, and which left her feet and ankles free to climb the rough acclivity. Her cheeks were fresh and rosy, and she walked with an easy swinging step which only a life in the mountains could have given.

It was no less a damsel than Sal Slocum, to whom these paths had been familiar since childhood. She talked to herself as she proceeded.

"I'm goin' to cut clean loose from Shanandoah Bill. He's gettin' to be an out and out devil, an' that's not my sort. He was a prime hunter once; but he's droppin' into wuss bizness. He kin cut his own stick fur me.—An' I'm goin' to git Mr. Frazer out of his clutches; for Mr. Frazer's a gentleman, right through."

Sal dropped into a reverie, which seemed a pleasant one, by the smiling expression of her face.

Her reflections were broken by a new incident. In the path ahead of her, at some distance appeared the figure of a man, whom she recognized at a glance. He bore a rifle on his shoulder, but his head was downcast, and he failed to perceive the girl before him, until they were face to face. She had stationed herself directly across the path.

"Hold your hosses, Tim Hardy!" she resolutely cried. "Stop right thar! I want a look into that eye of yours, for I don't b'lieve it's an honest one."

The young lover looked up with an expression in which gloom, anger and despair seemed mingled.

"Get out of my way, Sal Slocum!" he exclaimed. "Don't you stop me. I've got something in hand to day besides idle chatter. Step out now, and let me go on."

"Not a bit of it, Tim. Do I look as if I'm arter chatter? We gals ain't all magpies; if you boys is half fools. Let me tell you that!"

"I don't care! Step aside, or I'll put you aside!"

"You will, eh?" The girl spread her sturdy form and looked him sternly in the eye. "Jist try it on, if you want a heave in them bushes! It's no good you've been arter, Tim Hardy, and well you know it! And I'm goin' to put a spoke in your wheel. What have you done with Mr. Frazer?"

Tim started, and looked around him with a wild glance, like a bird that suddenly finds itself caged.

"I don't know anything about your Mr. Frazer," he sullenly replied.

"You lie!" she sternly averred. "You lie two ways. He aren't my Mr. Frazer; and you do know all 'bout him. You daren't deny it."

"The devil take him and his partner!" yelled the maddened lover, with the look of an insane man. "They've robbed me between them! They've robbed me of Sue! And they wanted to buy me off! But I've flung him back his blood-money! And I'm bound to have revenge on the other!"

He started off in a wild pace. But Sal's strong hand caught his collar, and jerked him back.

"Stand there, you crazy fool, till I'm done!" she commanded, in a tone that seemed to cow him. "You're a fool, I say! A crazy fool! Nobody's robbed you of your gal. Pity you ain't got the wit to see that Sue's only playin' with this chap. It's queer if we gals can't have a bit o' fun, without raisin' Cain like this."

"She's not! She's in love with him! She's cut me dead!" he persisted.

"Don't tell me that! I talked with her 'bout it this mornin'. She says it's all fun, and that she wouldn't give your little finger, for the whole of him."

A flash came into Hardy's dull eyes. He gripped her arm fiercely.

"Are you lying to me? By the gods, if you are—!"

"You know what sort of a gal I am," she contemptuously replied. "Slide on, if you don't b'lieve me. I tell you, you're a fool, Tim Hardy. You conceited boys think the gals ain't got no right to look over their left shoulders, when ye're about. Sue's sound to the core. But she's not a baby, to tie herself fast to you with her apron strings."

A quick revulsion of feeling had come over the young lover. He tottered, and his eyes filled with tears. He let his face fall on the girl's shoulder, as if for sympathy.

"You know how I loved her, Sal."

"Yes, yes, my poor boy!" she stroked his hair, all the woman in her roused by his emotion. "But you must quit thinkin' that gals is babies, to be rolled about in a baby coach."

"I loved her so! And I thought she was false to me! I thought these men meant her harm!"

"And you sold yourself for a traitor and a villain!" she cried, with renewed anger. "What have you done with Mr. Frazer, I say?"

"Bill has him. Bill and his gang."

"Shanandoah Bill? Where is he? Lead the way, at once! If Bill does him a harm let him look out fur Sal Slocum! If he wakes me up he mought find he's got a catamount on his hands! Where is he, I say?"

A marked change of feeling had come upon Hardy within the last few minutes. His mad desire for revenge had vanished, and a deep remorse taken its place. He stood like one stupefied, until the impatient girl vigorously shook him.

"Lead on!" she cried, in hoarse tones.

"Follow me!" exclaimed Hardy, suddenly roused to action. "We may be in time yet."

They hurried along the mountain path, up which Bart Wilson and his companion were now climbing, not far from the place where this conversation had occurred.

It was not long ere they reached the hut in which, an hour before, the half-crazed lover had left his victim, in the cruel hands of Bill Bounce and his gang.

A single look told them it was empty. The door stood wide open, but there was not a soul in sight.

While they stood looking blankly at each other, Bart and Old Tom broke from the bushes and into the inclosure.

"What's up?" cried the former. "The cage empty? The birds flown?"

"It's you, you dirty little hound!" yelled Old Tom, fiercely clutching Hardy's shoulder. "You're at the bottom of this! Tell us where they are, or by the eternal—"

"They were here an hour ago!" stammered the bewildered youth.

Lead us to them, on your life! If any harm comes to Mr. Frazer, by all that's good, I'll brain you for a treacherous dog!"

"I wish I could," faltered Hardy. "I wish I knew where to find them."

"Follow me!" cried Sal, with energy. "Follow me! I've a notion I kin take you to the spot."

She sprang forward into the bushes, the others eagerly following.

But, with the reader's permission, we will leave them on this quest and seek others of our characters. We left Frank Frazer in a delicate and perilous position. It is time we were following his adventures to the end.

We have already seen that the place to which he had been trapped was empty. The villains, in fact, had quickly abandoned it and taken their prisoner over the mountain flank to a more secure and secluded covert, several miles distant.

This was a narrow opening in the bottom of a deep ravine, rendered dark by the thick growth of pines which enveloped it. But on this particular spot a rock outcrop had hindered the growth of trees, forming a narrow opening in the forest.

It is at a moment of thrilling interest that we approach this secluded scene. The form of Frank Frazer is firmly bound to a tree at the lower extremity of the clearing, his left hand being extended and tied to an adjoining sapling.

Opposite him stands Shenandoah Bill, rifle in hand, and a look of deep malignity on his savage face. At one side stand his two hardened companions, looking on with curiosity, but without a shadow of human sympathy for the victim.

"I's told ye, lads," remarked Bill, "that that thar b'ar story were all a hoax. Yonder's the b'ar as tuk off Bill Bounce's finger. He's a prime shot. I'll guv in to that. But we're goin' to see what old Betsy kin do at a good mark. Finger fer finger, that's my law. I'll bet ye what ye dare that I rip off the little finger clean."

"You can't do it, you cowardly hound!" returned Frank, with a resolute tone. "You might hit a bit of dead wood. But you haven't the soul to look a man in the eye and send a straight bullet."

"I'll bet a cow I hit the mark plum center!" roared Bill, angered by his contemptuous remark.

"I'll bet an eagle you can't."

The lookers on clapped their hands.

"The fellow's got grit, anyhow," one of them remarked.

"Goin' to take in that bet, Bill?" asked the other.

"Ain't I then?" cried the villain, as he raised his heavy rifle. "Some folks has a notion that the Alleghany buzzard can't shoot. I'd like some on 'em to be 'round now. 'Tain't of'n a feller gits sich a mark."

Frank stood with unflinching face as the rifle slowly came up to the marksman's shoulder. The villain seemed playing with his victim. But if he thought to make Frank show the white feather he was mistaken.

"You lubberly dog!" he cried. "You don't give me the chance I gave you. But I'll bet you ten to one you don't hit the mark."

"Done!" cried Bill, with sudden spleen, as he pressed his finger to the trigger.

The mountain sides rung far and near with the loud echoing report.

CHAPTER XII.

A FLIGHT FOR LIFE.

It was a critical moment. Despite the intense resolution to which Frank had nerved himself, he could not but shudder when that deadly weapon belched forth its flaming message.

But his foes saw no signs of shrinking in him. A scornful laugh came from his lips.

"Missed," he cried. "I'll take that stake. I knew the cowardly craven couldn't look a man in the face and hit him. I've seen that kind of braggarts before."

A deadly oath burst from Bill's lips. He was foaming with rage at his failure, and the contemptuous scorn of his victim.

"By the blazes!" he yelled. "I'll make a surer shot, and at a bigger mark than the dog's finger! We'll see if I can't shet up that sassy tongue! Lend me yer rifle, Phil."

He ran to one of his confederates, and tried to wrest the rifle from his hand. But the man resisted.

"None of that, Bill! We won't have no murder!" he sternly cried. "You kin pay him up fur yer finger, but no murder. Let go my rifle. You sha'n't shoot till you come to yer senses."

He jerked the weapon from Bill's grasp, and sternly repelled him.

For the moment the savage's hate was turned against his friend. He clinched his brawny fist, and made a threatening step forward. But he hesitated, as the other showed no sign of flinching.

"Keep yer dirty old rifle!" yelled the furious villain. "I'll feed old Betsy with another bullet. She's wuth a dozen of yer new-fangled pieces, anyhow."

He snatched up his own weapon, and commenced to hastily reload it, his eyes red with fury.

But, during this altercation the prisoner had not been idle. Certain quick movements had taken place, unobserved by the wrangling villains. When they again directed attention to him he was in his old position, with outstretched hand. Yet there was a quiet smile on his face that did not soften the temper of his antagonist.

In a minute Bill had reloaded his rifle, and raised it again to his shoulder.

"The finger, mind you!" cried Phil. "We won't have any murder!"

The irate marksman made no answer, but he was evidently aiming at the exposed hand. As if determined to not again fail he took a long, steady aim. He had, for the moment, got all his old nerve back, and was determined to regain his credit as an expert rifleman.

Not a muscle moved in Frank's frame. He said nothing, but the quiet, disdainful smile lingered upon his lips. There were no signs of shrinking dread.

Again the mountain echoes took up the loud report. Again fire flamed from the weapon.

"Hit, for a shilling!" yelled Bill.

"Missed, for a crown!" came back, in ringing tones.

And the astonished ruffians saw that their prisoner had suddenly disappeared. Therestood the trees to which he had been bound. But to their utter astoundment he had vanished! He seemed to Bill's amazed eyes to have melted into the air, or sunk into the ground, so unexpected was this strange event.

But the two lookers on were less at a loss.

"He has broke loose! He has dug fer the woods! After him hot-foot!"

The speaker dropped his rifle to a trail, and sprang forward, followed quickly by his companions. The shooting match was suddenly transformed into a wild pursuit.

Frank's escape was not really so miraculous as it seemed to his captors. A combination of happy chance and of alert energy were alone concerned. By a strange freak of luck the first bullet aimed at him had really cut the cord that bound his hand to the tree. But he was too shrewd to let his foes perceive this, and continued to extend his hand as if it were firmly bound.

The altercation between Bill and his companion over the rifle had given Frank another opportunity, which he was quick to take advantage of. During the minute in which they were too much engaged to observe him, he had, with his free hand, drawn a pen-knife from his pocket, opened its sharpest blade, and rapidly severed the somewhat slender cords which confined him.

In less than a minute he was free. But it was not yet the time to strike for liberty. He quickly resumed his former position, and when the attention of his captors was again directed toward him, there was no indication that he had moved.

He waited, indeed, with steady resolution while his skillful foe took deadly aim at his exposed hand. He waited until he saw Bill's finger press the trigger. Then, as the rifle belched forth its charge, the outstretched hand was hastily withdrawn, the captive slipped

around the trunk of the tree to which he had been confined, and with one bound gained the shelter of the bushes behind him.

Only his ringing response to Bill's exclamation told that astounded individual that he had not truly melted away into nothingness.

The forest, otherwise open, was thickly undergrown at the spot of Frank's escapade. This gave him a momentary advantage. By the time his pursuers had run round the screen of bushes, through whose heart he had broken, he was a good hundred yards in advance, and was flying, with the speed of a deer, through the open wood.

A stern chase is proverbially a long one. Much as his pursuers were accustomed to mountain travel, Frank's youth and agility made him a match for them. He darted lightly from stone to stone of the rough spaces, while in the smoother reaches he steadily gained on his heavier pursuers.

"Drop him!" cried Bill. "He is leading us. Wing him, or he'll give us the go-by."

"No," answered Phil. "That's only a spurt. He ain't got the bottom of us mountain chaps. We'll run him down in half a mile more."

Bill set his teeth in anger. He was not at all satisfied with the behavior of his companions, and commenced to reload his rifle while running at full speed, a trick which he had long before taught himself.

"Ye're gittin' so desp'rat' thin-skinned that I s'pose ye'll be wantin' next to put him in a cradle and rock him to sleep. Only jist wait till old Betsy speaks ag'in. She won't talk out three times fur nothin', you bet."

The chase continued until the bottom of the declivity was gained, and pursued and pursuers came out into the open ground below, that ran round the mountain foot.

Here the trees were more scattered, and there was no undergrowth. But at no great distance in advance a screen of bushes arose, forming the southern edge of the thicket, of which we have already spoken.

Straight for this covert Frank bent his steps, with no signs of a loss of speed. He had more bottom than his pursuers had given him credit for.

Now came a hard chase. With set lips and squared elbows, the hardy mountaineers thundered on behind the alert youth, whose form had the graceful 'slenderness, and whose movements the agility of a flying deer.

He had gained on them since the commencement of the chase, and was now from a hundred and twenty-five to a hundred and fifty yards in advance. They were running obliquely toward the screen of bushes, from which he was now but some twenty yards distant.

Turning with a quick movement, the fugitive darted directly toward this covert.

"That's yer game, hey!" muttered Bill, between his teeth. "It's about time fur old Betsy to sing out ag'in. We'll see if a bullet can't outrun ye."

He came to a quick halt, raised his rifle with a rapid action, glanced with lightning quickness along the sights, and pulled the trigger.

It was a critical moment for Frank Frazer. Many a deer had fallen by such a snap shot from that rifle; and in the marksman's haste he had taken a mortal aim. Yet the renowned Betsy was destined once more to fail.

For at the very instant of shooting the rifle-barrel was tossed upward, and its bullet went whistling harmlessly through the tops of the trees.

At the same instant there came a keen report from the shelter of the thicket. It was a bullet that had struck Bill's rifle and made him drop it so hastily from his stinging hands.

Here was an unexpected change in the state of affairs. The pursuers halted in alarm. Frank checked his rapid flight. Out from the sheltering bushes sprang several forms. A loud voice cried out:

"Hold your hosses, neighbors! Old Tom wants to have a finger in this pie."

The smoke was yet rising from the muzzle of the old man's rifle.

With a sudden impulse of fright two of the pursuers turned and fled away as rapidly as they had come. Bill had the same desire but not the same chance. For he unexpectedly found himself caught in so vigorous a hug that it seemed to him as if his arms were being crushed into his ribs.

"Let up!" he yelled. "Let go! Who's a-huggin' me? Is it a b'ar?"

"It's a b'ar with a t," answered Bart, whose muscular arms had clutched the villain in a vise-like grasp. "You murderous dog! I've a mind to squeeze you till I break every rib

under your dirty hide! What say, Frank? Shall I squeeze the dog into a jelly?"

"No," answered Frank sternly. "Leave him to me. I have a settlement to make with him."

"Let him loose," cried Old Tom, who had reloaded his rifle. "If he makes a move to run, down comes his house."

The discomfited villain stood with downcast head, his lowering eyes glaring on the circle of enemies who surrounded him. A look of spleen came into his eyes as he recognized young Hardy, among his captors.

"It's you, is it, you cryin' baby, that's done this?" was his sneering comment.

"You made a fool of me, Bill," answered Hardy, quietly. "I've come back to my senses again."

But Bill paid no attention to him. His surly eyes had continued their inspection, and he started violently on perceiving the face of one of his foes.

"Sal Slocum!" he yelled. "By the piping kangaroo, you ain't gone back on me Sal? You ain't goin' to fling Shanandoah Bill overboard?"

"Ye're out of my books, Bill Bounce," answered the girl, resolutely. "I used to like you, but I don't like no cut-throats nor thief-hiders. I'm done with you. And I'm done with swillin' whisky, too, as you taught me to do. You and me isn't the kind to hitch carts, Bill."

The villain hung his head. These words seemed to have cut him to the soul.

"It's my turn now," cried Frank, stepping quickly forward. "This man has been having some rifle practice on me. It's my chance, now. But I won't do anything unfair. Give him a rifle. Place us fifty paces apart. He brags on his shooting. We will see who is the best shot."

"No, no!" muttered Old Tom.

"You shall not do it," declared Bart.

"Won't I?" asked Frank, resolutely. "We shall see. Load up, Bill Bounce. I will give you a chance to see who is the best man. And no treachery, mind you! You know I shoot quick as lightning."

The look of surly hatred deepened in Bill's eyes. Without a word of reply he commenced to load his rifle. Frank took Hardy's rifle in his hand and quietly stationed himself.

Bill looked furtively around him, as he slowly continued to load.

"Stand back, gentlemen!" commanded Frank. "Are you ready?"

"Pretty nigh," muttered Bill, his eyes dropping as they met the clear orbs of his antagonist. He was evidently cowed. He had had too much experience of Frank's skill with the rifle.

Suddenly, with a covert glance, he dropped his weapon and made a mad plunge for the thicket, which was only a few paces distant from him.

"Stole away!" cried Frank, with a ringing laugh. "Took water! I knew it. I could see it in his eye."

"Then why did you let him go?" demanded Bart.

"Because I wanted him to. I wanted to make the hound show the white feather. There's a trail for you, gentlemen. These fellows will make straight for their hiding-place. Come, Tom, you can't say you have no trail now. And you, Hardy, you can follow the other two."

"What am I to follow them for?" asked Hardy, doubtfully.

"Because they are harboring an escaped thief! They are hiding a runaway bank cashier! And, by the way, there's some of your own father's money in his pocket. What say you to that? Will you take the trail?"

"Yes, if it leads to Florida," answered the young man, with sudden energy.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DOUBLE TRAP.

THE hiding-place of the fugitive held but two tenants, the same two whom we saw there on our last visit to the "fox-hole." On that occasion although the attempted escape of old Rand had been prevented by the unlucky arrival of the gang, yet the latter had not suspected the truth. There was no loss of faith in their confederate who had so nearly betrayed them.

The old defaulter had put himself into bad hands. There was no doubt but that these fellows would take good care of him; at least until they had squeezed him dry of all his stolen

funds. He cursed himself bitterly that he had committed a crime for the benefit of these remorseless villains.

He had been shrewd enough to conceal the stolen cash, or they probably would not have wasted much time in relieving him from all further care of it.

He had made one effort for a night escape from the cave; but a vigilant guard occupied the entrance and he was obliged to creep back to his cot again.

On the present occasion, however, Bill Bounce and two of his comrades had set out from the cave several hours before, leaving three men in charge.

Two others had just gone out, with the hope of getting a shot at a deer. Only one man remained, and he was the one who had already consented to take a bribe. The face of the shrewd old fugitive lighted up with hope.

"Keep wide-awake, Mike," his comrades had warned this guard. "Look out that the old coon don't salt your eyes."

"Maybe you'd best come with me, and leave Jake back," one of them suggested. "He's our best watchdog."

"Git out with you!" cried Mike. "Do ye s'pose I don't know B from a bull's foot? Slide arter yer deer. The old coon won't git away without me."

Thus reassured, the two hunters set out, leaving Mike in charge of the cave. A cunning leer came upon his face as he saw them disappear.

"Ye're a smart pair o' fools," he grinned. "I didn't say he moughtn't git away with me. Ther's a good two hours' start, and dang me if I don't strike for it."

The prisoner crept up to where his guard was thus meditating treachery. The sharp eyes of the old rogue eagerly scanned Mike's face.

"We are alone," he said, in an eager whisper. "Five thousand, you know. Five thousand hard dollars for a day's work."

Mike looked up in the face of his tempter.

"Sw'ar you won't go back on me."

"I swear," answered Old Rand. "Put me safe out of the reach of these men and the money is yours."

"And if you go back on that I'll brain you; or hand you over to the perlice," Mike shrewdly replied. "Git yerself up, now. If we're goin' to make tracks ther's no minutes to waste in blowin' soap bubbles."

"You will do it then?"

"You bet I will."

The old man hurried gladly back for his few effects. Mike straightened himself up, and examined the charge of his rifle.

"I'll be a rich man," he muttered to himself. "I kin snap my fingers at those fellers. They're not my style, anyhow. Guess I'll streak fur Californy, and buy out a gold mine."

In less than five minutes more the precious pair emerged from the mouth of the cave, old Rand trembling with hope and excitement, while Mike's quick eyes searched every sign of the surrounding locality.

"The coast's clear," he announced. "Strike out lively. Every minute counts now, fur they'll be arter us like blood-hounds."

Soon deep silence fell on the deserted spot. The fox-hole was empty of its foxes.

A half-hour passed, during which the birds, and the dropping leaves had it all to themselves. Then, with a crash through the rending bushes, there broke into view the sturdy form of Shenandoah Bill, breathless with running, and his savage face distorted with rage.

"By the tarnation pipers, if I don't git even with that chap, then ther's no vartue in lead and powder!" he blurted out. "But whar's the fellers? Looks kinder lonely round yere."

In a moment more he was in the cave. A deep suspicion came into Bill's mind when he saw that there was nobody on guard. Snatching up the lamp, which still burned near the entrance, he ran to the depths of the cavern.

"Empty, by the eternal jabbers!" he roared, in a fury. "It's a dead sell. But curse me fur a blind monkey, if I don't get even! I'll make 'em dance, like a coon up a gum-tree, 'fore I'm done with 'em!"

He dashed violently out of the cave, just in time to face his two comrades, who had at that moment made their appearance.

"What's the matter?" asked Phil, noting his perious aspect.

"Which way did you come? Down or up?"

"Down," was the reply.

"Then down's the word. They've struck off for the low level. Arter me, lads, We'll nail 'em 'fore they git out of the hollow."

"Nail who?"

"The dirty dogs that's run off with our gold mine. Old Rand's gone and the boys with him. But if I don't make 'em dance on hot plates I'm a jackass!"

He rushed down the glen too furious to observe whether or not he was followed. But the others were not slow to follow his lead. They were as furious as himself against the attempted treachery.

Meanwhile the escaped prisoner and his guide were making their way down the ravine, which became narrower and more difficult the deeper they descended.

It was little to the mountaineer, but his city-bred companion followed him with great difficulty, stumbling at every step.

"Give me yer hand," cried Mike. "Ten minutes more 'll fetch us to the level. Don't giv out, fur ye've got to try yer muscle hard 'fore the day's over."

They went on for a quarter of a mile further down the broken path.

Soon daylight showed ahead. They were near the clearing at the bottom of the ravine. At this moment Mike stopped with a bitter oath.

"The dog's dead," he declared. "Yander's the two boys ahead of us. And they're strikin' fur the holler."

"What's to be done?" asked the trembling fugitive.

"Take to the bush," rejoined Mike. "Lay low till they strike past. Then we kin wax out like fun."

Just here the bushes thickly clothed the sides of the ravine, and in a minute the fugitives had crept deeply within them with as little disturbance to their formation as possible.

Hardly had they thus vanished from view when steps were heard at the mouth of the ravine. The two deer-hunters came up, conversing loudly, without a thought of trouble above.

"We'll strike the side path that leads off to the right," said one. "And then over to the goose-pen. I've a notion we may find a buck thereaway."

"Hey! what's that? It sounds like a bull in the bushes."

This exclamation was caused by loud sounds in advance. The next minute there broke into view the form of Bill Bounce followed by his two comrades, and dashing wildly down the rock-strewn ravine.

In ten minutes they had covered as much ground as old Rand had been able to pass over in half an hour.

"Caught! by the rip stavin' roarer," yelled Bill, on seeing the two men before him. "Down with yer rifles, or I'll bore yer, ye divil's hounds!"

"Hold yer own!" cried the men in alarm, as Bill brought his weapon to his shoulder.

"What's loose in yer brains?"

"Whar's the old man? What have ye done with him? Quick, 'fore I make crow's meat of the pair of ye."

"The old man?" They looked at one another in surprise. "Ye're not sayin' he's gone? We left him in Mike's care."

"You did? You blasted idyots! You mought ha' knowed he weren't safe. Wait till I git my ten fingers on the red-wooled traitor! Did he come out below?"

"No. We've been down that way ever since we left the cave."

"Then he's took to the bush. We've got 'em caged, fur a cat couldn't climb these sides. Make fur the bottom, Jake. You streak fur the top, Phil. The rest on us 'll beat the bush. Won't I sell out Mr. Mike! Well, it's queer if I won't!"

The fugitives were caught in a trap. And it was not a comfortable one, for they were within easy hearing of Bill's well-laid plans.

But there is such a thing as a trap within a trap. In their furious pursuit of the fugitives they had lost all thought of the fact that they were fugitives themselves. Nor were they aware of the fact that two keen-sighted pursuers were on their trail, rapidly tracking them through the mountain woods.

Sal Slocum had left the party of pursuers, after first giving them some valuable information about the haunts of the gang. A remnant of feeling for Bill had caused her to withdraw. But they had been reinforced by Mr. Smike and several friends, who were on a hunting trip through the wood, and whom the sound of rifle-shots had attracted.

A few minutes sufficed to acquaint them with what had happened. Hardy and Tom had already disappeared in the woods on the trail of the fugitives. But Sal's information enabled the others to take a more direct course. They

made straight for the mouth of the ravine, of which she had given them the bearings.

It was not long after Bill and his comrades had darted furiously down the ravine ere Old Tom and Hardy appeared at its upper extremity. Their paths had come together some distance back in the mountains, and the trail was a well-defined one which a child might have followed. So they had made their way almost as rapidly as the fugitives.

They failed to discover the cave. The evidences that men had recently descended the ravine were so marked that they pushed resolutely on, convinced that they were on the right course.

At about the same time the remainder of the party reached the mouth of the ravine. The villains were caged.

But Bill Bounce and his companions had little heed of this. The short time which had elapsed since we last saw them had made a decided change in the situation.

Then they had just commenced to beat the bush for the fugitives. Now the old defaulter lay in their midst, groveling on the ground, while Mike stood with his hands tied behind him and a rope around his neck, the other end of which was flung over the stout limb of a tree above him.

"You treacherous dog!" hissed Bill. "You thought you'd git away with us, hey? Didn't know who you was foolin' with, I reckon. Haul away, boys. The rope and the limb fur a traitor!"

Mike was deathly pale, but not a word came from his lips. He saw no relenting in those savage faces.

At this moment Phil dashed down the hill.

"Make tracks," he yelled. "They're arter us! They're comin' down the hollow."

The next instant Jake dashed up hill.

"Scoot, lads!" he shouted. "Ther's a gang of 'em below. Streak out!"

"I'd hang this traitor first, if all Virginny was thar!" roared Bill, in reply. "Haul away!"

In a moment the unhappy wretch was dangling between heaven and earth, his body writhing in agony.

"Make all fast, and let him kick!" cried Bill. "We're trapped, and we've got to fight for it."

His words were drowned by the report of a rifle. Down with a thud dropped the struggling wretch. The bullet had cut the rope.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END OF THE CHASE.

It was an exciting moment. In the center stood the ruffianly gang, surrounding old Rand, and the wretch who had just been providently saved from death. Above them in the ravine appeared the two scouts, rapidly descending. Below stood the remainder of the pursuers, headed by Frank Frazer, from whose rifle had come the shot which had cut the hangman's rope.

"Fur yer lives, boys!" cried Bill. "We're in a cage, but we'll fight our way out. Let 'em have it lively."

He snatched up Mike's fallen rifle, and leveled it with deadly aim.

"Hold!" cried the voice of Mr. Smike. "We're two to one. If there's a shot fired, we will mow you down. Surrender yourselves, or it will be worse for you."

"Surrender be hanged!" roared Bill, pressing the trigger of his piece.

He was fortunately jostled at that minute by old Rand, who was struggling to his feet. The bullet, aimed at Frank Frazer, went a foot above his head.

The shot was answered from among the pursuers. Just who had fired was not evident, but the old defaulter staggered, gave a groan of pain, and fell in a limp heap to the ground. The bullet had struck him, instead of the man at whom it was aimed.

"Let 'em have it!" yelled Bill, his blood fully up. "Are ye goin' to stand yere, and be shot down? Pelt it into 'em!"

But his comrades did not see matters in the same light. They were considerably outnumbered, and it was utter madness to enter into a struggle for life and death. Only two men cut off escape up the hill, and they turned and dashed in this direction. Bill, with an oath of fearful import, reluctantly followed, his eyes glaring with rage.

They left behind them the two prostrate men, the one groaning with his wound, the other recovering from his partial strangulation.

The two scouts firmly closed the path.

"Hold your level!" cried Old Tom. "I'll bu'st some of ye, if you come a step nearer!"

But beside the narrow path was a thick growth of bushes, of some ten feet in width. Into this the foremost fugitives sprung, hoping to pass their opponents.

Dropping his rifle Hardy grappled with one of the fugitives. Tom sprung forward and dealt another a heavy blow, that hurled him prostrate in the center of the path. Then quickly aiming he sent a random bullet after the others.

A cry of pain attested the fortune of his shot, but the three remaining fugitives kept on, without a pause.

Several other shots came from below, as the men at the foot of the ravine rushed upward in pursuit.

As they came up Mike sprung to his feet and joined them.

"Bill Bounce tried to hang me!" he cried, grinding his teeth. "We'll see if Mike McGinnis don't bounce him."

On he dashed, over the man whom old Tom had knocked prostrate, and past the spot where Hardy was still struggling with his opponent.

Hardy's rifle lay where he had let it fall, and Mike seized it as he ran furiously on. Several of the others followed, with equal energy.

"Take them alive, if you can," shouted Frank. "But wing them if they won't stop."

The furious leader ground his teeth. He had a debt of revenge against Bill Bounce.

At the point which they had now reached the sides of the ravine were less precipitous, and the undergrowth reached almost to their summits. Two of the fugitives were visible, slightly in advance, running at full speed up the open path.

But Bill had disappeared. He was either tearing through the bush, or had concealed himself, with the hope that the pursuers would overrun him. But Mike was too old a bird to be caught by any such chaff. He halted, his little keen eyes shrewdly running over the thicket with the acuteness of an old hunter.

The others ran on, leaving the revengeful ruffian vigilantly reading the signs. His effort was not in vain. Soon he detected a light waving of the bushes far up the steep side of the ravine. The next minute the shaggy head of Shenandoah Bill appeared. Catching the upper edge of the hill the alert ruffian flung himself upward, and in a moment more was standing erect, far above the heads of his pursuers, his burly form outlined against the sky.

A hoarse laugh attested his triumph.

"Ye mought as well try to nab an eagle as Shenandoah Bill," he shouted back disdainfully, as he prepared to dash away through the woods of the upper level.

It was his last moment of triumph. From below there came a flash, a keen report, the hands of the fugitive were flung wildly upward, as his form tottered on the brink of the hill; then, toppling over, he came crashing downward, rending like a stone through the bushy growth, and striking on the stony bottom of the ravine with a sickening surge that dashed every remnant of life out of his torn frame.

"A bullet's as good as a rope," muttered Mike, as he lowered his smoking piece. "I don't think ye'll try to hang Mike McGinnis ag'in, soon."

Bill Bounce's career had ended, and by the hands of one of his own confederates. He lay stone-dead in the path, a warning to all lawless ruffians.

Dropping his rifle Mike stole cautiously down the path.

"Reckon I'd best make tracks," he muttered. "Mebbe they'll be fer hangin' me 'cause I shot Bill Bounce."

That was the last of him seen in that region. He succeeded in escaping, and thenceforth relieved that part of Virginia of his unwelcome presence.

There were two of the party who had taken no part in the pursuit. Frank and Bart had stopped on coming to the prostrate body of old Rand, leaving their companions to continue the chase. They looked at each other significantly.

"It's the end of a long game," remarked Frank. "And I am afraid we will only have a corpse to take back. He has got it in the breast."

"It's the money we want, not the man," replied Bart.

The old man was groaning with pain. Blood oozed from a wound in his chest. Frank knelt down and lifted his head from the hard ground. The dying man opened his eyes, and looked up into the face that bent kindly over

him. He seemed to recognize Frank, and a shudder ran through his frame.

"Is it you?" he asked. "Have you pursued me to the death?"

"Yes," answered Frank, resolutely. "You robbed me and my friend, Norman Rand. All we possessed in the world lay in the bank under your charge. You ran off with our fortunes, and those of many poorer souls. We swore to pursue you, if it was to the end of the world. We have fulfilled our oath, yet I am sorry to see you in this state."

"I am a dead man!" was the despairing reply. "I cannot enjoy what I sold my soul for!"

"Then restore it to its true owners," cried Bart. "You may smooth your way into the world to which you are going."

The old man shut his eyes, and seemed to hesitate.

"There is a poor family in this valley almost starving for lack of the money you took from them," continued Frank. "Will you die with their want on your soul?"

"No. I dare not!" shuddered the old villain. "You will find the money—in the Martinsburg and other banks—deposited by—Joseph Carrol. The papers are here." He laid his hand on the slender package beside him. "And there is—some of it—sewed—in my clothes."

These words were pronounced with great difficulty. The effort to speak proved too much for him. As he ended a gush of blood came from his lips, his head fell back limp and lifeless, the old defaulter was dead.

Frank gently laid down the head he had supported, and rose to his feet.

"Our mission is ended, Bart," he said. "He is gone to expiate his crime before a wiser and greater judge than we."

"And it is lucky for us that he put us on the track of the money before he died," answered Bart, less feelingly. "It would have been mighty uncomfortable for two chaps brought up like us to have been left beggars. I have no objection to play the 'two orphans' with you, but don't care to play the beggarly orphans."

Gradually the pursuers returned. One of the fugitives had escaped, but Old Tom brought back the other. There was something of the lion in the old man as he brought his captive down the ravine, with an iron grasp upon his collar.

Of the other two, the one Tom had struck lay insensible in the path. Hardy, with some aid, had overcome and secured his man. Thus of the gang they had three prisoners, two had escaped, while the leader lay a corpse in the ravine, and the old criminal whom they had engaged to conceal and had sought to plunder, likewise had breathed his last.

We need not dwell long on the remaining phases of our story. The reader must already perceive the true errand of the two young Baltimoreans to this secluded valley.

They had each had a large amount of cash placed for safe-keeping in the bank of which Norman Rand was cashier. The latter, having lost heavily of the funds of the bank in speculation, had laid violent hands on the trust funds and on what ready money of the bank he could seize, and had made his escape in disguise.

A year had since passed, during which he had contrived to remain concealed. During this period the bank had failed, the stockholders losing all their money, and the depositors most of theirs.

The two young men had also been stockholders to a considerable extent, and had no fancy for being reduced to poverty. Certain information, received from their friend Mr. Smike, had given them reason to suspect that the fugitive was hidden in this locality, and they had accordingly come hither—with what result the reader already knows.

We may briefly conclude. The papers which they found in the dead man's pocket showed that he had deposited the money, in moderate sums, in various banks, under the guise of a western drover. A considerable quantity also was found concealed about his person. All this was eventually restored, with the result of putting the broken bank on its feet again, and of repaying the losses of all its patrons.

As for our friends of the village of Sumter, young Hardy is safely married to Sue Wilder, and is thoroughly ashamed of the time in which he let himself become crazed with jealousy. The money lost by his father in the bank has been recovered, and the family are in comfortable circumstances again.

Sal Slocum is also married, and to a man worth a dozen of her old lover. Old Tom Turnstile still survives, the same honest old soul of yore, and is proud of the fact that the two city

gentlemen, in their occasional visits to Mr. Smike, never fail to call on Old Tom, for a day's shooting in his company.

As for the captured rascals, they served a short term of imprisonment for their concealment of a criminal; and have since departed to parts unknown. Sumter, happily, knows them no more.

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